JANUARY
A THRILLING PUBLICATION
25¢

RANCH ROMANCES

TALL MAN FROM DODGE

With no trace of the girl, he still kept hunting

MAN RUNNING

She knew he was lying—that his name wasn't Jones

A DRAMATIZED STORY THAT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!

Do You Wonder What Makes You SO DARN TIRED?

Posed by professional model.

I used to feel weak and run-down from the moment I woke up in the morning to the time I tumbled into bed at night. I found myself getting upset by almost everything — I became cross and irritable with the children, and I'd start arguments with my husband over the smallest things. I finally decided to see our family doctor.

After examining me the doctor explained that my tiredness was due to a lack of vitamins and minerals in my diet. To help correct this condition he recommended that I take a good food supplement.

I sent away for a trial supply of Vitasafe High-Potency Capsules that I had seen advertised. Soon my energy came back, and now I feel like a new woman. If you feel tired and worn-out why not take advantage of this trial offer right now?

25¢ just to help cover shipping expenses of this

FREE 30-DAY SUPPLY HIGH-POTENCY CAPSULES

LIPOTROPIC FACTORS, VITAMINS AND MINERALS

29 proven ingredients: Glutamic Acid, Choline, Inositol, Methionine, Citrus Bioflavonoid, Liver, 12 Vitamins plus 11 Minerals

To prove to you the remarkable advantages of the Vitasafe Plan . . . we will send you a free 30-day supply of high-potency VITASAFE C.F. CAPSULES so you can discover for yourself how much stronger, happier and peppier you may feel after a few days' trial! Just one VITASAFE CAPSULE daily supplies your body with adequate amounts of *each and every vitamin* believed essential to human nutrition. Also included in this exclusive formula are Glutamic Acid — an important protein derived from natural wheat gluten — and Citrus Bioflavonoid. This formula is so complete it is available nowhere else at this price!

AMAZING PLAN SLASHES VITAMIN PRICES ALMOST IN HALF

With your free 30 day supply of Vitasafe High-Potency Capsules you will also receive complete details regarding the benefits of an amazing Plan that provides you regularly with all the factory-fresh vitamins and minerals you will need. *You are under no obligation to buy anything!* If after taking your free Capsules for three weeks you are not entirely satisfied, simply return the handy postcard that comes with your free supply and that will end the matter. Otherwise it's up to us — you don't have to do a thing — and we will see that you get your monthly supplies of capsules *on time* for as long as you wish, at the low, money-saving price of only $2.78 per month (plus a few cents shipping) — a saving of almost 50%. Mail *no-risk* coupon today!

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43 West 61st Street, New York 23, New York

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Choline Bitartrate	30 mg.	Vitamin B_{12}	3 mcg.
Inositol	10 mg.	Niacin Amide	25 mg.
dl-Methionine	10 mg.	Calcium Pantothenate	4 mg.
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Lemon Bioflavonoid Complex	5 mg.	Folic Acid	0.3 mg.
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Vitamin K	0.05 mg.	Phosphorus	39 mg.
Vitamin A 12,500 USP Units		Iron	30 mg.
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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is *a positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas?* That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally,* not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you* how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. Send today for a copy of the fascinating *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs. Use the coupon below or address: Scribe A.R.W.

The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

Scribe A.R.W., The Rosicrucians, AMORC, Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

Name_____

Address_____ State_____

35th Year of Publication

Editor: Jim Hendryx, Jr.

RANCH ROMANCES

VOL. 211, NO 1
JANUARY, 1959

JANUARY ISSUE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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SO MANY PEOPLE with the "germ" of writing in them simply can't get started. They suffer from inertia. Or they set up imaginary barriers to taking the first step.

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Few realize that the great bulk of commercial writing is done by so-called "unknowns."

Not only do these thousands of men and women produce most of the fiction published, but countless articles on business, sports, hobbies, social matters, travel, local, club and church activities, etc., as well.

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Eastern Gal

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine all the time and certainly do enjoy it. Am 18 years old, 5'2" tall, weigh 115, have brown hair and blue eyes. Like most all sports, music and dancing. Would like to hear from both girls and boys and promise to answer all letters.

LORNA BAKER

Foyes Corner,
Portsmouth, N. H.

Success at Last

Dear Editor:

What does one have to do to make the grade in Our Air Mail? Have written at least 10 times in the last 2 years, and if I don't succeed this time I'm going to give up. I am single, 32 years old, 5'9" tall and weigh 165. Like all sports, but especially love flying. Promise to answer all letters from gals between 25 and 35, and will exchange snapshots.

RICHARD SCHLIKER

160 Retreat Ave.,
Hartford 6, Conn.

Likes Life

Dear Editor:

Enjoy Ranch Romances very much, and I always turn first to the pen-pal page. I like to write letters. In fact, I like anything and everything — animals, sports, TV, dancing, music and whatever. Am 16, brown hair and eyes and 5'8" tall. Hope somebody, anybody or everybody in this country or any other will pick up a pen and write to me.

JUDY CHADD

303 W. 11th St.,
North Platte, Nebr.

Farm Fan

Dear Editor:

Have you room for one more? Have been reading Ranch for a great many of my 41 years, and would like to hear from other women from all parts of the globe who read it. Am an ex-office worker who now lives on a farm and would like to get more mail. I'm married, am 5'4" tall, have dark hair, gray eyes and weight 110 pounds.

MRS. JANICE RENEGAR

R. R. #2,
Carthage, Ind.

Tall Teener

Dear Editor:

Am 16 years old, 6'4" tall, with brown hair and blue eyes. Love to sing and listen to hill-billy music. The late and great Hank Williams was my favorite, but I like 'em all. Will answer all letters and exchange photos. Call me Tex; it's my nickname.

CLEATUS TEEKEE

600 South Javine,
Skiatook, Okla.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 35 years Our Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Crazy About Horses

Dear Editor:

I'm 17 years old, blonde hair, brown eyes, height 5'4". Would like to hear from anyone who loves horses as much as I do. My hobby is horses and I have one of my own to ride and care for.

NORMA ROHDE

Route 2,
Rieseville, Wis.

Theatre and Transport

Dear Editor:

Am interested in new pen pals — letters from men and women all over the country. My age is 38. Though I have a B.S. degree from a local Teachers College, I decided against a teaching career. My hobbies include summer theatres, amateur theatricals, reading, photography and the history of transportation.

HARLAND W. FRENCH

97 Bellevue St.,
Willimantic, Conn.

Fascinated

Dear Editor:

I like people and like to receive mail, and when I saw your column in Ranch Romances I just knew this was my lucky day. Am 19, with blue eyes, light brown hair and stand about 5'5". Love to dance, travel, read and find life fascinating, but my main interest is music. Prefer to hear from young men between 21 and 30.

JUDITH BARBANELL

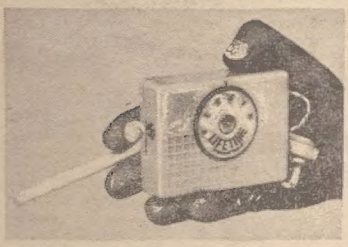
2133 Daly Ave.,
Bronx 60, N. Y.

(Continued on page 8)

AMAZING PORTABLE RADIO WORKS INDEFINITELY!

Complete! — Ready to Operate! — No Batteries! — No Tubes!

No Longer Than a Regular Pack of Cigarettes. The New LIFETIME POCKET RADIO Gives You INTERFERENCE-FREE Reception!



Expensive Transistor and old style tube-type radios this size cannot give you more clarity or more freedom from interference than the LIFETIME POCKET RADIO. You get high quality reception for the low, low price of just $4.95 for the complete LIFETIME POCKET RADIO, already assembled and ready to operate.

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The **Lifetime Pocket Radio** comes built into a colorful, durable, shock-resistant plastic case, completely enclosed . . . no bigger than a pack of cigarettes **(regular size).** Easily slips into your pocket or purse. Its fine, attractive appearance rivals portable radios selling for many times the price. **Featherweight!** The entire **Lifetime Pocket Radio** weighs so little that you'll be amazed. Just 4 ounces, complete! So light, so small, so inconspicuous that you'll hardly know you have it with you. Fill in and mail the coupon today while the limited supply lasts.

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Listen Anytime — Anywhere!

Now you can tune in on radio programs without anyone else knowing that you are listening to music, sports, news, weather, etc. Order your **Lifetime Pocket Radio** now before the major sporting events this Spring deplete our limited supplies. **A FANTASTIC IMPORTED VALUE! NOW AVAILABLE WHILE THE SUPPLY LASTS, AT THE UNBELIEVABLY LOW PRICE OF JUST $4.95!** And remember, there's absolutely nothing to go out of order. The **Lifetime Pocket Radio is not a toy,** but a precision instrument constructed and designed for your own personal use.

Here's What You Get When You Order:

- Complete (ready to play) **Lifetime Pocket Radio** in attractive case, with calibrated tuning dial. Nothing to pay the postman when he delivers your radio.
- **COMPLETE WITH ANTENNA . . . FURNISHED AT NO EXTRA COST TO YOU.**
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Here's How You Can Get The Complete **Lifetime Pocket Radio** for just $4.95! Yes just $4.95 is all you pay. No Hidden Costs. Nothing To Pay Later. Nothing To Assemble. Your **Lifetime Pocket Radio** is ready to play the moment you remove it from the shipping carton!

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WE PAY POSTAGE

Gentlemen: I enclose $ ..... for the Lifetime Pocket Radio. Please send me at once. If not delighted, I may return it within 10 days for refund.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone.... State.....

Sorry, No C.O.D.'s

LIFETIME POCKET RADIO
31 West 47th St., Dept. TF-6
New York 36, N. Y.

OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from page 6)

Ex-Englishman

Dear Editor:

I'm a British ex-serviceman from London, England, who recently achieved a life-long ambition to come and live in this great country of yours, about which I used to hear so much from American servicemen. I'd like to hear from people any age, anywhere, who also enjoy your fine magazine, which I consider tops in the Western field.

ERNEST H. JAKINS

5718 N. Winthrop Ave.,
Chicago 40, Ill.

Fearful Fan

Dear Editor:

Have been a fan of Our Air Mail for some time, but just now have got up enough nerve to try my luck at getting some mail, as I greatly enjoy writing and receiving letters. Am a divorcee, 25 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 125 and have auburn hair, hazel eyes and freckles. Like square-dancing, TV, swimming and taking long rides in my car. Would love to hear from anyone in my age group or older with similar interests.

AUTUMN E. SHINER

R. D. 2,
c/o L. G. Sutton,
Saegertown, Pa.

South Pacific Sailor

Dear Editor:

Am 20 years old, 5'7" tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are swimming, skating and reading. Am serving aboard the U. S. S. Guadalupe in the South Pacific and would like to receive letters from State-side girls.

ROBERT HLIBICHUK, MM FN,
U. S. S. Guadalupe AO-32
FPO San Francisco, Calif.

Woods Sprite

Dear Editor:

Am a lonesome gal in Illinois, as there is only one person here my age, 13. My hobbies are horses and rock collecting. Would rather sleep on the ground than in a bed, and in the summer you would find me in the woods most of the time. People between 10 and 15 won't you please fill my mail box.

DIANE STEWART

P. O. Box 14,
Dundas, Ill.

Faithful Reader

Dear Editor:

Have been reading your wonderful Ranch Romances for 17 years and never miss a copy. Am 34, brown hair, gray eyes, 5'11½" tall and weigh 190. Enjoy dancing, hill-billy music, hunting, fishing, football and baseball. Like to collect snapshots and will exchange same with anyone who cares to write.

HAROLD STRAUCH

408 N. 5th Ave.,
Yakima, Wash.

Minnesota Miss

Dear Editor:

Am a lonely farm girl who would like to make some pen pals through your column. I'm 25, have green eyes and dark brown hair, and like dancing, writing letters, fishing and music. Would be happy to hear from any boys or girls about my age.

FRANCES RINGWELSKI

Rte. 1, Box 149,
Little Falls, Minn.

A Dozen Years

Dear Editor:

Have been a reader of Ranch Romances for 12 years, and Our Air Mail has always been one of the first things I read whenever I get a copy. I'm 36, single, 6' tall, have brown hair, blue eyes and weigh about 165. I like to take pictures and write letters, so come on, everybody, let's correspond.

W. PERRY WILLIAMSON

Box 1225,
Akron 9, Ohio

New Californian

Dear Editor:

I moved to California not long ago and don't know too many people, so would like to hear from folks anywhere in the world. Am 20 years old, stand 5'6" and weigh 135, with light brown eyes and black hair. Hobbies are dancing, swimming and collecting postcards. Promise to answer all who write.

BARBARA LUSCIER

Box 959,
Morro Bay, Calif.

Newly Thirty

Dear Editor:

Am new to the 30's stand 5'10½", weigh 165, with sandy hair and yellow cat eyes. I'm a good carpenter and a fair artist, though a little too nervous to do it commercially, and like to dance. Would prefer to correspond with women from 20 to 40, but men are also welcome.

DUKE PILCHER

Rte. 1, Box 328,
Gervais, Oregon

Chief Hobby—Letters

Dear Editor:

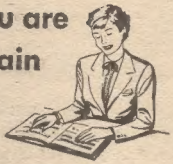
Would like to renew my main hobby of letter writing, with men and women between 21 and 35 years of age. I'm a divorcee with two small sons. Have dark brown hair, green eyes, am 21 years old, 5'6"" tall and weigh 135. Aside from letter writing, I like to do many things, including fishing, hunting, dancing, singing, reading, etc.

SHIRLEY ANNE HOLDER

c/o Henry Mardy
Mud Lake, Idaho

Learning to Play Music is Now Easy as A B C

A. First you are TOLD in plain English WHAT to do



B. Then a picture SHOWS you HOW

C. Then you PLAY it yourself -- and amaze your FAMILY and FRIENDS!

"Every Hour a Golden Hour"
"My husband arrived home yesterday from a long journey, not knowing I had been taking lessons. I sat down and played. When I got through, he said it was wonderful! Taking your lessons was the most sensible thing I ever did in my life. Every hour I spend at the piano is a golden hour. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!"
—*Mrs. Mildred Fink, Cadwell, Ohio*

PIANO, GUITAR, ACCORDION —*ANY INSTRUMENT*

So many people deprive themselves of the pleasure of playing their favorite musical instrument—because they have the idea that learning music requires special "talent" and long hours of practicing scales and exercises. But that's not true any more—and it's a pity more people don't realize it. Our modern way to learn makes it EASY AS A-B-C.

Even if you don't know a single note now, you can sit right down at the piano (or any other musical instrument) and actually play a piece of simple music in your very first week. And you can keep on making amazing progress until soon — wonderfully soon — you'll find yourself able to play almost anything you like by note.

No Special "Talent" Needed

No wonder one million people (including TV star Lawrence Welk) have turned to the U. S. School of Music method to make their dreams of playing music come true! No special "talent" is needed. And you may learn right at home, in your spare time—free from the rigid schedule imposed by a teacher. Costs only a few cents per lesson, including sheet music.

Stop Cheating Yourself of These Joys!

Why not let this famous home-study method bring the many pleasures of music into YOUR life? Popularity. New friends. Gay parties. Good times. Career. Extra money entertaining or teaching others. Understand, appreciate, converse about music. Learn lives and compositions of modern and great masters. Relax. Banish worries and frustrations. Satisfy self-expression, creative urge. Gain self-confidence.

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— *Howard Hopkins, East Syracuse, N. Y.*

Surprises Family & Friends
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— *Peter H. Kozyra, Manitoba, Canada*

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☐ Violin	☐ Tenor Banjo	☐ Flute	
☐ Piano Accordion		☐ Piccolo	

Do you have the instrument?.....

Mr. / Mrs. / Miss .....
(Please Print Carefully)

City .....State .....

Address .....
(Insert Zone Number, If Any)

ROUNDUP
of Western Movies, Music and TV

ROY ROGERS made his usual tremendous hit at New York's Madison Square Garden in Sept. and Oct. when he brought in his rodeo, including cowboy championship contests in calf roping, steer wrestling, bronc and Brahma bull riding. Trigger and Trigger Junior were of course on hand . . . Alan Ladd and Ernest Borgnine star in *The Badlanders,* a Western involving a gold mine robbery. Claire Kelly, Kent Smith, and beauteous Katy Jurado give good supporting performances . . . Our boy Elvis is still claiming plaudits for his performance in *King Creole.* The Presley is now in Germany with the Army, singing, presumably, for the frauleins over there between stints driving an Army truck . . . Warner Bros. has five Western series running on ABC-TV: *Lawman* with John Russell and Peter Brown; *Maverick* with James Garner and Jack Kelly; *Sugarfoot* with Will Hutchins; *Cheyenne* with Ty Hardin; and *Colt* .45 with Wayde Preston. Did someone say Westerns were losing favor? . . . Paramount Pictures created a complete Western town for Hal Wallis' *Last Train from Gun Hill,* Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn, Carolyn Jones and Earl Holliman star in this big-scale outdoor drama . . .

Warners has let us know that some of the more spectacular Westerns coming up will be *Born Reckless,* the exciting story of a rodeo riding circuit with Mamie Van Doren and Jeff Richards; *The Hanging Tree,* about Montana's gold mining past, with Gary Cooper

"I call it a bad day if I don't make $25 before noon"

(This chair alone brought $4.50 with twenty-five minutes work and 32¢ in cleaning materials.)

by Harold Holmes

"Just a few months ago I made the big move. I gave up my job and started spending all my time in the little business I had been running on the side. It wasn't an easy decision, but, now I'm tickled to death I made it. Not just because I'm my own boss or because I have an excellent chance of making over $10,000 this year. It goes deeper than that.

"You see, this idea has caught on like wildfire in my town. Not a day goes by without my phone ringing with women calling for appointments. The beauty of it is that once a woman becomes my customer, she calls back year after year. Not only that, she tells her friends, too, and they call me. Before I know it I'm swamped with work. (And at $7.50 an hour net profit it doesn't take long before my bank account is really mushrooming.)

"Funny thing, but back last year, before I started, I never realized the money there was in this business waiting for someone to come along and collect it. Just think: every house in town has furniture and most have rugs or carpeting. I concentrate on just the better homes and have more work than I can handle. You know why? Because women are fussy about their furnishings. Can't stand to see them dirty. That's why they call me over every year.

"The average job is worth $25.00 to me and takes a little over 2 hours. Out of this, after paying for materials, advertising and other expenses I net about $15.00 clear profit. This means I need just 3 jobs a day to clear $11,250.00 in a year. Frankly, since this will be my first full-time year I'll be glad to hit the $10,000 mark. But after that this business should grow larger each year until I have to hire men to help me handle the business.

Personally Trained by Another Dealer

"Believe me there's nothing magic about it. I didn't know a thing about cleaning and mothproofing before I became a Duraclean dealer. But after my application was accepted I was trained right here in town by a successful dealer from another city. I was astonished by the short time it took me to become an expert. Actually, much of the credit must go to the Duraclean process, which is so safe it has earned the Parents' Magazine Seal.

"The portable machine you see is just one of the electrical machines I use. It manufactures a light aerated foam with a peculiar action chemists call 'peptizing'. It means that instead of being scrubbed deep into the fabric, dirt is gently ABSORBED by the foam, leaving the fabric clean all the way down. Women can't believe their eyes when they see how it works. Colors appear bright again, and rug pile unmats and rises like new. I don't have to soak rugs or upholstery to get them clean, which ends the problem of shrinkage, and means the furnishings can be used again the very same day. This alone has brought me a lot of customers.

"As a Duraclean dealer I make money with two other services, too: **Duraproof** . . . which makes furnishings immune to moth and carpet beetle damage (it's backed by a six year warranty) and **Durashield**, a brand new dirt-delaying treatment. It coats fabrics with an invisible film that keeps dirt out. On jobs where I perform all three services, I make a triple profit!

"One of the nicest things about being a Duraclean dealer is that every month I get help from Duraclean Headquarters. My services are nationally-advertised in famous magazines like McCall's, House Beautiful and many others. I also get a complete advertising kit prepared by experts. (There's even a musical commercial!) I get a monthly magazine full of methods to build business and I can meet with other dealers at Duraclean conventions. I'm also backed by insurance. In fact there are over 25 regular services I get under their unique System.

No Shop Needed

"Maybe you too would like to break away from your job and make a fresh start in a business of your own. Do you need a shop? Certainly not. I operate from home. Need a lot of money to start? Not at all. Duraclean finances reliable men, after a moderate down payment, and furnishes enough supplies to return your TOTAL investment.

"You get everything you need: equipment, supplies, advertising matter, personal training, and regular help from Headquarters. To get all the details, fill out the coupon. There's no obligation and you can decide for yourself. I'll say one thing: if you DO become a Duraclean dealer, you'll be glad the rest of your life that you took time today to write."

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and Maris Shell; *Westbound,* with Randy Scott and Virginia Mayo, covering the bloody, turbulent Civil War days in the West; and *Rio Bravo,* with John Wayne and Dean Martin, a Technicolor outdoor adventure drama . . .

Richard Boone, who stars as Paladin in CBS-TV's *Have Gun, Will Travel,* turns in a good job as a character with two sides: the tough gunslinger and the cultivated gentleman who spouts poetry. Mr. Boone gets a prodigious amount of fan mail, seventy percent of which is from the distaff side . . . ABC-TV's Wyatt Earp this season is prettier to look at than it was before, since female beauty has been added. Everyone seems pretty well convinced that romance has an important place in Westerns; ladies don't really want to be left languishing on pedestals, which is what they used to do when heroes romanced only horses . . . Fans of the *Cheyenne* series, also on ABC, were first surprised and then delighted by the change from Clint Walker's constant grim consternation to new star Ty Hardin's constant good-natured grin, which endures through gun battles, love scenes, and horse opera dramatics . . .

Ricky Nelson, who tackles his first big movie role in Warner's *Rio Bravo,* plays the part of Colorado, a sharp young cowpoke with a lightning draw. Ricky was a newcomer to Westerns, but proved an apt pupil and soon had his sixguns doing tricks that impressed every oldtimer this side of the Pecos. His fans know he's on target in more ways than one: he's become a full-fledged crooner whose records sell not like hotcakes, but like hit records. You all know Ricky well: he grew up before our eyes on his parents' show, *Ozzie and Harriet* . . .

Jon Provost seems, with good reason, to be quite happy with his new "mother," June Lockhart, in his *Lassie* show on CBS-TV these Sundays nights . . . Gregory Peck was thwarted in his desire to rent New York's Rockefeller Plaza to publicize *The Big Country* . . . Over at ABC-Paramount Records they're very happy about George Hege Hamilton, a guitar twanger with a college accent, a top pop artist and a teen-age idol. He's from Winston-Salem, and speaks with a North Carolina drawl. He's majoring in English at The American University in Washington (his daddy warned him against putting all his eggs in one basket), led bands in high school and college and hit big with his first record, *A Rose and a Baby Ruth.* George dresses in Ivy League clothes, is sandy-haired and slim, and although today he stands two inches over six feet, his wife Tinky says he's still sprouting. George's loves, besides Tinky, are country music in general and Gene Autry in particular. He's quiet and thoughtful; even his guitar, leaning against the wall, seems more than usually cultured and sensitive . . .

Gary Cooper still going strong.

Jack Lord has been signed to costar in Paramount's *The Hangman* as a hunted man sought by Robert Taylor, starring as a U.S. marshal. Tina Louise and Fess Parker have fat parts in this film, just getting under way . . . Joe Akins, at Paramount, is doing the screen script for *Heller with a Gun,* to star Sophia Loren under George Cukor's direction . . .

The baseball career of Chuck Connors, who played with both the Cubs and the Dodgers, ended ingloriously because of two occupational

(Continued on page 96)

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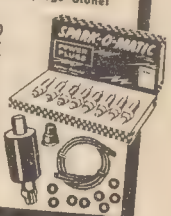

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TALL MAN FROM

The trail of her abductors had long grown cold, here in in this forsaken land, and the rider knew he had no reason to believe her still alive—yet he kept searching

FOR days, so many that he'd lost count of them, he'd tried not to think of what must have happened to the girl. The only thing he had left of her was the last letter she'd written to him. But it was something his mind refused to let go of for any length of time. He couldn't sleep soundly for it, no matter how tired he was, and always a cold sickness seemed to churn around in the pit of his stomach.

"Stop thinking!" he told himself angrily.

He might as well have told the wind to stop

DODGE

BY BEN FRANK

blowing. He remembered Edith as he'd last seen her, a child of eight. Now she was eighteen, but still he thought of her as a child traveling alone, frightened and helpless. Her dark hair, two heavy braids...

Abruptly the trail rounded a granite ledge, and he saw the squat, ugly building standing at the crossroads.

He pulled up in surprise. Taking this round-about trail between Rogersville and Dodge, he'd seen nothing but wild, lonely country. But here was a store, and although the roads were grass-grown, they must lead to ranches or homesteads hidden beyond the rocky ridges, for the only habitation in sight was a shabby, unpainted ranch house some rods to the right of the store building.

He urged his horse forward. Suddenly, it seemed, the emptiness of the valley, with its eddies of gray dust, gave off a feeling of grim hostility.

"What a fool notion!" he thought.

But now a wariness fiddled through him as he rode along the slope, a rangy young man with a lean, bitter face and a haunted expression in his steel-blue eyes. A hundred miles back at the town, Rogersville, he'd come to the end of Edith's trail. At first, he could think of nothing to do but return to Dodge and try to pick up his life where he'd so abruptly left off.

Despair had filled him. He'd had no hope left of ever finding his sister, who had left St. Louis weeks before and had disappeared some place along the wild, uncertain way. Then he'd heard a rumor of outlaw country along this lonely trail. Outlaws had struck Rogersville the night Edith had last been seen. He still had no hope of finding her, but he was a stubborn man. Wide at the shoulders, taller than most men, he was twenty-seven years old—and his name was Collin Page.

APPROACHING the store, he had a better view of the ranch house. An old story and a half, saggy-roofed affair that had a lean-to kitchen tacked to its back. A heavy-set man had stepped out on the front porch, slanted a thick shoulder against a porch post and now stood gazing at Collin. He was hatless and wore a gun, and his hair looked dark-red in the shade of the porch.

A corner of the store building came between Collin and the house, and Collin turned his attention to the false-front broken by a door and two grimy windows. A faded sign said, "Bellham's Store." Leaving his horse in the scant shade near a well curb, Collin pushed in through the door.

An old man came shuffling forward through a doorway to a back room. Heavy, whiskery, almost bald, he stared at Collin out of unfriendly eyes and asked, "What'll it be?"

Collin glanced about. The stock was low; there was little choice. He ordered cheese and crackers, a can of peaches.

"Reckon you're just riding through?" It was a question.

Collin nodded. "Mind if I eat in the shade by your well?"

The old man shrugged. "Nobody pays much attention to what I mind, anymore. You aim to be around long?"

"No." Collin paid the tab and gathered up his purchases.

"Where you from, stranger?"

"Here and there."

"Where you headed?"

The prying galled Collin. His first impulse was to walk out without answering. But he thought better of it.

"Dodge," he answered. "What's on west of here?"

"More of the same. A homestead or a ranch, now and then. No towns, unless you go south to Larson City."

"I'm not going south," Collin said. "Who owns the ranch north of you."

"I do. My boys run it, and they ain't looking for any hired hand. Reckon you ain't a slow eater?"

Collin eyed him narrowly. Was the old man telling him that he should get out? He could just go jump in his well.

"I've got good, sharp teeth, mister," he said flatly.

Turning, he strode out into the hot sun. Long-legged, long-armed, a look of anger in the set of his lean jaw.

He sat down on the well curb and began to eat, taking his own sweet time about it. The cheese was good enough, but the crackers were old and stale and had to be washed down with swigs of well water. He was finishing the peaches when the man he'd seen at the ranch house came limping around the corner of the building.

Halting, the man sized Collin up with a sharp head-to-toe glance. "Howdy," he said. "Wondered what was keeping you here so long."

He looked as the old man must have looked when he'd been in his twenties. Ruggedly handsome, heavy but not fat. There was no friendliness in his voice or his slate-gray eyes, and again Collin felt the hostility of this place.

He stood, long, limber, unhurried. He remembered the rumor that outlaws sometimes haunted this lonely country. Could this be the reason the old storekeeper and his rancher son distrusted strangers? He decided to explain his presence here in the Bellham Valley, but not his mission.

"I'm Collin Page," he said. "I've been East and am passing through on my way back to Dodge."

A THIN smile touched the man's full lips, but his eyes told Collin that he did not believe a traveller would take this route to get west to Dodge.

"Burl Bellham's my name," he said, watching, waiting.

"I talked with your father in the store, Collin said. "He told me his boys ran the ranch."

"Yeah," Bellham said. "Pete, Les and me. The old man's too damn' busy running his store to fool with ranching."

He laughed abruptly and apparently for no reason. It was a harsh, unfunny sound that grated on Collin's nerves.

"If I was in your place," Bellham went on, "I'd get the hell out of here and ride as far as I could before dark."

"Why?" Collin asked.

The man grinned. He had strong, even teeth that gleamed white in his brown face. "Things happen sometimes in this country at night." Turning abruptly, he disappeared around the corner of the building.

Unease fiddled through Collin. He stepped around the building and watched the man returning to the shabby house, his lame right leg dragging up a trail of fine, gray dust. Then, for a moment, Collin considered going into the store and asking some questions about the country, but decided he'd be wasting his time. These people would not confide in strangers. Returning to his horse, he mounted and rode on. At the top of the next ridge, he halted to glance back.

Except for the restless eddies of dust, there was no movement in the narrow valley. Apparently no one was following or watching, but a shiver stole through him. Laughing at himself for his notion of danger, he rode on. And then he again thought of Edith and the letter in his pocket, and there was no laughter, or fear of danger, or anything left in him, except the sick churning in his stomach.

Lost in despair, he let his horse pick his own course toward a wooded ravine. He had covered less than half the open space ahead when from someplace behind him came the sharp, angry bark of a rifle.

Collin was completely taken unawares. automatically, he flung himself to the ground. The shot was high; the bullet whined into space. Lifting his gaze to the ridge, he saw nothing, except the bright, cloudless sky, with a skelton of a dead tree outlined against it. Carefully he eased to his feet, keeping his horse between himself and the ridge from which the shot had been fired.

"A warning to keep moving?" he asked himself grimly. "Or just plain poor shooting?"

Walking in front of his horse, he went down into the protection of a timbered ravine. There, he swung aboard and rode rapidly westward. When he came up out of the ravine, he saw that the ridge was a purple haze in the distance. But now he rode cautiously, keeping his eyes and his mind on the things about him.

He had no doubt that a Bellham had fired the shot, and he was sure that he was being watched. And he knew he was going to find out why. He had no hope of finding his sister alive, but what he had learned of her disappearance now made it impossible to pass up the Bellhams without further investigation.

STEP by step, he went back over his search for Edith. At a river port, he'd found a stage driver who remembered a lone, dark-haired girl leaving a stern-wheeler to board his stage-coach. After that, Collin had eventually followed his sister's journey from one stage stop to another until he'd come to the town of Rogersville. Tracing her onward had been complicated by the fact that the old man, who had driven the outgoing stage, had died. Collin had almost given up when he'd met the town marshal.

"Sure, I remember that girl," he'd told Collin. "She looked mighty tired, like she'd come a long ways. Old John Huggins wasn't ready to roll, so she sat down on her suitcase over there by the corner of the post office to wait. When I looked next, she was gone. Never thought no more about her. That was the night when outlaws killed Cam Stewart."

Stewart was the town banker, he went on to say. The night riders had gone to his home, where he lived alone, forced him to take them into the bank and open the vault.

"First time anything like that ever happened here," the marshal had added. "I guess you can understand why I never thought any more about the girl."

Now, if the Bellhams had robbed the bank, if Edith had been a witness, if they'd been afraid she might identify them—there were a lot of "if's," but they all added up to questions that Collin had to have answered.

To ride back into the Bellham valley now would be suicide. Let 'em think he was scared and getting out. Ride westward a day, circle back a night or two later, maybe catch one of 'em alone and see what kind of answers he had for some of the questions. Face grim, he urged his horse forward.

The sun had dropped toward the purple line of distant hills when he saw a scattering of cattle to his left. Rounding a knoll, he came to a wagon trail that led westward and followed it. Presently, from the top of a ridge, he saw a cluster of trees, a windmill fanning the breeze, a house and pole corrals reaching around outbuildings. Here was one of the lone ranches that old man Bellham had mentioned. But unlike the Bellham place, this one looked clean and inviting.

He came to a pole fence and followed it toward the house. A little girl played in the front yard. On the porch, a shaggy old dog lay with his nose between his front paws.

The dog saw Collin. He stretched to his feet like an old man with rheumatism, eased down from the porch and walked stiff-legged toward the child. Collin heard her tinkling laughter as she ran to meet the dog. She put her arms about the dog's shaggy neck and hugged him, her friend and companion in a lonely world. The dog gave her a soft, warning growl that she seemed to understand, and she lifted her head and saw the tall man in the saddle.

SHE smiled. Her eyes were as blue as the sky, Collin saw, and her short-cut hair was the color of ripe wheat straw. Something about her brown throat reflected the light of the low sun, catching Collin's attention. Then he remembered that Edith had been about this girl's age the last time he'd seen her, and the child read something in his changing expression that sobered her.

"Hello," Collin said. "What a nice dog you have!"

Again the smile lit up her small, freckled face. She was barefoot and stubby-legged and as healthy as a wild colt. The flashing object about her neck was a fine gold chain from which a small golden locket dangled.

"His name's Chaser," she said. "Mine's Janie."

Collin swung to the ground. The old dog growled again, but his bushy tail had begun to wag. Collin, who had an understanding way with children and animals, reached out a gentle hand, and the dog sniffed and stopped growling and allowed himself to be petted.

"He likes you," Janie said. "What's your name?"

"Collin."

"I never heard a name like that before. —"

But Collin's eyes were fixed on the locket. Heart-shaped, delicately carved, bordered with tiny flowers.

He reached out a trembling hand and took the locket between his fingers. Bending close, he saw the worn initials on the back—*CP to EP*—and a great weakness came to his knees.

"Where'd you get this, Janie?" he managed hoarsely.

Before she could answer, a woman stepped out on the porch.

"Hello, there," she said in a tight voice.

She was slender and as straight as a ruler, and her quiet blue eyes met Collin's unflinchingly. Her hair, dark-blond, looked reddish-golden in the low sun. She held a double-barrel shotgun in her slim hands, and Collin knew that she was capable of shooting him, or anyone, who might be a menace to the child.

He pulled his hat from his shaggy dark hair. "How do you do," he said quietly. "I was riding through, saw your little girl and stopped to talk to her."

"Janie's my oldest brother's little girl," she said.

Collin saw now that she wasn't as old as he'd first thought. The suspicion and mistrust in her face had simply made her seem older. Not much more than twenty, he guessed. A clean, clear-skinned girl, with a soft mouth and a strong jaw line.

"I'm Ann Austin," she said.

He knew she wanted his name in return, but because of the initials on the locket, he wasn't sure that he sould give all of it to her. "Collin," he said, "from Dodge."

"That's a long ways from here," she said.

"He asked me where I got the locket, Ann," Janie said.

For a moment, Ann Austin's face remained very still. "Oh," she said, smiling slowly. But fear lurked in her eyes as she lifted them to Collin's face. "Janie loves to wear it," she added, "and I let her as a reward for being a good girl."

Collin knew this was the wrong moment to ask questions. Too much interest in the locket would only add to the girl's mistrust of him.

"I wonder if I could buy some grain for my horse?" he asked. "Also, a meal and a night's lodging for myself?"

Again she gave him a long, level look. Whether or not she liked what she saw, Collin couldn't tell. But he had a notion that some of the tenseness had left her.

"Dad," she called, and a moment later a white-haired, stooped old man appeared in the doorway.

HE SAW the gun in Ann's hands. Then he saw the tall stranger, and his seamy face hardened, and he dropped a hand to his own sixgun that was buckled about his waist. Carefully he stepped out on the porch.

"Who's this, Ann?" he demanded.

"A Mr. Collin from Dodge," Ann answered. "He would like feed for his horse and lodging for the night. Mr. Collin, this is my father, Samuel Austin."

Looking at Collin, Samuel Austin saw the bitterness in the blue eyes, the lines in the young-old face, the low-hanging gun. What he saw evidently displeased him, for he began to shake his head.

"Sorry, Collin. We've got no room for you. But Ann will fix you something to eat, and one of the boys will fetch some grain for your horse."

It was an ultimatum. Like the Bellhams, these people did not want strangers around. But somehow Collin had to learn how the locket had come into their possession.

"I'll be glad to pay you for the feed and lodging," he said, stalling for time.

"We don't want your money," Austin said flatly.

Janie had climbed up on the porch, and now Ann led the child into the house. A moment later, a tall, fair-haired man shouldered his way through the door and came to look at the stranger. He, too, kept a hand close to his sixgun.

"This is Fred," the old man said.

"Ken'll bring some grain for the horse," Fred said.

Mistrust lined his brown, blocky face, and his eyes followed Collin's every move. He looked tough and hard, and Collin knew that here was a man who could hold his own with guns or fists.

Carefully Collin leaned back against the pole fence. The shadows were endless now, the sun almost set. He could think of only one way to learn what he wanted to know, and he decided to take the risk.

"My full name is Collin Page," he said.

He saw that the name meant nothing to them.

"The locket the little girl is wearing belonged to my sister, who has disappeared recently," he went on. "I gave it to her for her eighth birthday. That was ten years ago, just before I headed west with a wagon train."

Now the men were staring at him, their faces tight.

"Her name is Edith. On the back of the locket are initials—hers and mine. There can be no question about it being the same locket."

"Go on, Collin," the old man said harshly.

"My mother died suddenly—they lived near St. Louis. That left Edith and me, and she was coming to Dodge to live with me. Her letter was slow in reaching me. By the time I got it, it was too late for me to go after her. Or stop her from coming alone. I waited for her arrival as long as I dared, then started looking for her. The last trace I found of her was at Rogersville. Now I find your granddaughter wearing the locket!"

The old man's face had become wooden, and when he lifted a hand to his forehead, it shook slightly.

"Ann found the locket," he said hoarsely. "About two weeks ago, wasn't it, Fred?"

Fred nodded.

"Found it out on the range north of the house," the old man continued. "Saw something glittering in the sun and—"

He stopped talking abruptly as Ann came

through the door. Smiling, she stepped down to where Collin stood and gave him a paper-wrapped package.

"Some sandwiches," she said.

He thanked her, and she added, "You're quite welcome."

HE SAID nothing to her about the locket. Her eyes were steady and clear and almost friendly, and he didn't want to change them. He turned to his horse and swung into the saddle, wondering if he had again come to a trail's end. Now he wanted to be alone with his bitter thinking and rising anger.

"Here's Ken," old Samuel Austin said; and Collin saw a second fair-haired man striding toward him, a partly filled gunny sack in his left hand. That, Collin knew, left his right hand free to draw the gun he wore.

"Oats," Ken said, handing the bag to Collin.

Collin judged him to be a year or two younger than Ann. A nice looking, clean kid, with wide-spread shoulders and a faintly humorous squint about his eyes.

Again Collin offered to pay for the food and the grain, but was flatly refused. He turned his horse and rode away along the fence.

"Goodby, Collin!" It was his one sure friend among the Austins, little Janie, who had come running to the door. "Come see us again sometime, Collin!"

He smiled and waved and rode on. Beyond the next hill, he found a timbered stream. Now the sun had set, but there was still light left in the sky. He gathered dry wood, built a small fire, made coffee and ate. He rolled and lit a cigarette, but the smoke was a bitter taste in his mouth.

Four things he knew for sure. The Bellhams didn't want him hanging around. Someone had ambushed him. Edith had been through this part of the country, or someone who knew what had happened to her, had been and had lost her locket. And the Austins were frightened people.

Tomorrow, he'd start circling to the north. The next night, he would ride back into the Bellham valley. What might happen after that, he couldn't guess. But he had a hunch that his second visit to the valley would be a pretty grim affair.

Spreading his blankets, he lay down with his worn saddle for a pillow. He closed his eyes. Sleep refused to come. There were too many unanswered and frightening questions in his mind. If Edith had been taken captive by bank robbers and if the Bellhams were the outlaws—the sharp snap of a dry twig sent a start tingling through him.

Easing his gun free, he sat up cautiously. The fire had died; the night under the trees was as black as tar. Behind him, he could hear his horse tearing at the leaves of a shrub. There was no other sound, except the hammering of his heart.

"Collin?"

He recognized Ann Austin's voice instantly. Hushed, uncertain. Then he caught a glimpse of her in the starlight, a shape a little darker than the night.

"Ann!" He shoved to his feet, frightened for her, a little angry. "Ann, I almost shot you."

He moved toward her. He could hear her breathing hard and had a notion that she'd run part of the way.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said. "I climbed the hill back of the house and saw your campfire. As soon as the family was asleep, I came. You see, Collin, I got to thinking—well, Janie likes you, and old chaser made up with you. It's pretty hard to fool a child and a dog."

SHE was quite close to him now, and he suddenly wanted to reach out and touch her. But he put his hands into his pockets and stood very still, waiting for her to go on.

"Dad told me about you—and the locket," she said. "He was afraid to tell you the whole truth."

"What do you mean?" he asked tensely.

"Two weeks ago, your sister was alive. I'm sure of it." She drew a deep breath. "It was storming that night. I got up to shut my window. There was a flash of lightning, and I saw four riders cutting toward the ledge of rock north of our house. One was a woman.

"The thunder awoke Janie, and I ran into her room and lit the lamp. Then I came back to my window. There was another flash, but by then, the riders had passed beyond the

ledge. The next day, I rode out that way and found the locket. I believe now that when your sister saw our light, she hoped the locket would somehow help you—that the initials on it might mean something to the one who found it. Of course, I had no idea who she was, or that she was a prisoner—not until you came today. Then the more I thought about it—one man leading, two riding behind her—"

She touched his arm, and her fingers were warm and strong. Her hand found his, and she pressed the locket into his big fingers. For a moment, he was swept back to that long ago birthday. Edith's childish happiness, her quick kiss and bright laughter. "I'll wear it always, Collin!" she'd cried.

"The cattle rustling began about eight months ago," she answered. "Jim was killed six months ago."

"The Bellhams?"

She shied away from that. "What do you know about the Bellhams?"

He told her of his experience in the Bellham valley. "Funny thing," he added, "that the old man would try to operate a store where there seem to be no customers."

"There used to be customers," she answered. "Homesteaders. But they gave up and moved on after we had some dry years."

"And now the Bellhams keep a store and a ranch for a blind and a hideout?"

"We don't know," she said despairingly.

TIE-FAST MAN

Out West where the buckaroos ride,
Whenever a man takes a bride,
He figures one wife
Should last him for life,
And hopes the knot won't come untied!

—By Limerick Luke

"Please don't hold it against my father for not telling you what I saw," Ann hurried on. "He's an old man, and trouble has made him afraid of strangers."

"What trouble," he asked her.

The trouble, she told him, had begun with cattle losses. Then one day, Jim, her oldest brother, little Janie's father, rode to a distant part of the range and failed to return. They found him a day later. He had been shot twice in the back. They could only guess what had happened, but they believed he had been killed by the same riders who had been stealing the cattle. Lora, Janie's mother, had never gotten over the shock of Jim's violent death. She had sickened and died a few weeks later.

"Collin, what are you planning to do about all this?"

He smiled thinly in the darkness. He knew, but he also knew it would be better not to tell her. He was going back to the Bellham valley. Tonight, as soon as she left him. Everything he had learned added up to what he had begun to suspect. What had to be done, he would do himself. He would not drag the Austins, or anyone, into something that might bring more trouble to them, one way or another.

"Morning's soon enough to decide," he told her. "Tonight, I'm going to give my horse a chance to rest."

She didn't question his answer. "I've got to be getting back to the house," she said.

She began to walk away from him. "Come to the house for breakfast," she added.

"Thanks, I'll do that," he said, knowing that when morning came, he would be hidden someplace in the Bellham valley.

COLLIN stood against a tree until she had disappeared over the backbone of the ridge. Then, leaving his camp as it was, he saddled, skirted the ranch buildings and crowded his horse as much as he dared along the trail he had covered only a few hours before. He wanted to be well hidden within sight of the Bellham place when the sun came up.

The starlight fell against his grim face, and now the anger and bitterness churned inside him. He turned his thinking away from what might have happened to Edith. He thought of his own journey into the West ten years ago. Of hardships and dangers along the wagon trail that stretched from the muddy Missouri across the wild, unsettled country. Of his first ranch job. Of learning to ride, rope and shoot. Of finally coming to the roaring town of Dodge.

He'd been luckier, or more adaptable, than most of his kind. He'd got his foot in the door of the ranching business. He'd worked tirelessly, planning to bring his mother and sister out here to live with him as soon as he could make a comfortable home for them. If he had not let go of everything to search for his missing sister, he would have succeeded where others had failed. His bitterness grew.

It lacked only an hour until dawn when he came over the last rocky ridge. But now the stars had been lost under clouds, and the valley below was as black as ink.

Collin rode down into it cautiously, feeling the north wind against his left cheek. He planned to cross to the east wall and hide near the place from which he had first glimpsed the store and the old ranch house. But when he came to the store building, he pulled up and sat staring at it. If Edith were a prisoner of the Bellhams, he asked himself, where would they keep her?

He lifted his eyes. There was still no hint of light in the eastern sky. This, he decided, was as good a time as any to circle the buildings on foot, searching for some place or room in which a person could be safely kept.

He left his horse ground-hitched at the well. He eased along the side of the building and around to the back door. For a moment, he stood looking at the black blot of the old house. Then he faced around and ran his hands over the door.

It was made of heavy timbers. It was as solid as the rocky ground under his feet. He found the knob and tried to open the door. It was locked. He found the key-hole with the tips of his fingers and then put an ear against it.

He heard a sound. It came again. A sigh, or a quivering breath. He took a chance. He said softly, "Edith." Everything became as quiet as death.

"Edith," he said again," this is Collin."

He heard a rush of footsteps.

"Collin!" Fingers were clawing at the inside of the door. "Collin—get me out of here?" A girl's voice, filled with hope and fear and a sob.

"That's what I'm here for," he said. "Tell me what kind of a place you're in."

"It's the back room of the store," she said. "It's like a dungeon. There're no windows. There's another door that opens into the main part of the store. But it's as solid as this one—and locked with a key."

"Who has the key, baby?"

"The old man. They take me to the house to do the work in the daytime, but the old man locks me up here at night. So far, he's kept the only keys—but the others are about through letting him keep them. You've got to get me out of here before it's too late, Collin!" Her voice broke.

"Easy, sis," he said.

Again he ran his hands over the heavy door, and despair filled him. To break the door down would bring the Bellhams in full force—it would have to be battered open with some heavy tool. Somehow, he had to unlock the door.

"Sit tight," he said. "I'll get you out of there."

HE RAN to his horse, mounted and rode until he came to a ravine deep enough to hide the animal. He ran back to the store and called softly through the heavy

door, "Be ready to do some running when I come for you."

Crouching low, he moved on to the house. He slowed and eased past the front porch and up to a front window. He pulled his gun and slashed out. In the deep silence of the black morning, the crash of glass was like an explosion. Flinging himself to the ground, he edged under the overhang of the porch floor and waited.

A man cursed. Shouts went from room to room. Feet shuffled and stamped into boots. He heard the door open and men crowd out on the porch.

"A window don't bust itself out," someone growled.

Three men moved down off the porch, a faint gleam of guns in their hands. Collin could have touched the foot of the one who limped—Burl Bellham.

He turned and said, "You stay here and look after the house, Pa. Pete, Les and I will scout around."

They moved off warily toward the store, and the darkness swallowed them.

Collin eased up on his elbows. The old man now stood near the edge of the porch, staring after them, a gun in his own hand. Collin stood soundlessly.

"One move or sound out of you, and I'll kill you!" he whispered.

The old man stiffened. Except for a sudden gasp, he made no sound.

Collin stepped up close and put his gun against the man's back. "All I want is the key to the back door of the store," he said into the old man's ear.

"You the girl's brother?" the old man asked huskily.

"Yes. I stopped at your store yesterday noon. The key!"

"In my hip pocket," Bellham said.

Collin found the three keys on a metal ring. "Which one?"

"The smallest one," the old man answered.

Collin lifted his gun, whipped it down, and the old man crumpled in his arms. He dumped him in the place where he'd been hiding a moment before and then leaped into a clump of weeds and lay flat. He could hear the Bellham boys returning.

They came stamping back to the house from the blackness of the night, mumbling to each other, drowning out the old man's harsh breathing.

"That window's been cracked a long time," one said. "Funny it'd give way tonight." Another called, "Pa, everything's all right at the store. The girl's still—now, where the hell did he go?"

They went crowding into the house, and Collin leaped to his feet and raced on his toes to the store.

He and Edith had almost reached the ravine where he'd left his horse when angry shouts went up at the ranch house. The Bellham boys had found the old man. Or he had regained consciousness and had made himself known. Collin had been careful not to hit him too hard.

THE shouts and curses frightened Edith. She stumbled, and he caught her and half-carried her over the uneven ground. They slid down into the ravine, and he swung her up behind the saddle and climbed up in front of her. Neither had spoken to each other, but now she gasped, "We can't make it, Collin!"

"Sure, we can," he said. "By the time they've saddled up, we'll be lost among those fishbacks on the ridge." But he lifted his eyes, saw the first gray fingers of dawn in the sky and knew that daylight and a tired horse carrying double were terrific odds against them.

He turned westward, for the west rim of the valley was the nearest to them. The clouds had broken away in the east, and the light strengthened with frightening rapidity.

When they reached the first ridge, he glanced back. At first, nothing but emptiness met his quick gaze. Then he saw three moving specks a little darker than the gray dawn and knew the chase was on. Face grim, he swung the tiring horse among the wind-swept fishbacks, boulders and crumbling ledges.

The first red glow of the sun found them at last, and Collin called a halt to give the horse a rest. He and Edith dismounted and stood with their backs against a cliff. For the first time, he asked questions. Most of her answers, he had pretty well guessed.

In Rogersville, she had waited for the west-

bound stage. Sitting on her suitcase near the post office in the darkness, she had seen a light go on and off in the bank. Suddenly there had been a muffled shot and a cry immediately followed by a second shot. Terrified, she leaped to her feet, caught up the suitcase and started to run back along the street.

Three man rode from the alley beside the bank. One turned a gun on her, and another said, "Hold, it! She might come in handy." This second man leaped down beside her and hit her.

The next thing she knew, it was daylight, and they were camped in a thick clump of trees at the edge of a stream. She heard the men arguing about what to do with her. The one who had been shot in the leg by the banker—he'd had a hide-away gun in the bank vault—wanted to kill her to get her out of the way.

"We ain't in the clear, yet," Pete Bellham said. "We get in a corner, we can stand her up where they can see her. Them lawmen'll think twice before they start shooting."

With this, Les Bellham agreed.

That night, the long, terrifying trek to the valley began. Someplace along the way, they found a horse for her. The last night, it stormed. They passed near a house, and when she saw a light go on, she could think of nothing better to do than drop her locket and hope it would be found and offer some clue to her whereabouts.

FOR two weeks, they had kept her here in the valley, forcing her to work, but not harming her. However, as time passed, giving them a growing sense of safety, she had begun to see in the Bellham boys' attitude toward her a rising danger. The old man had stood between them and her, but the brothers were growing rebellious.

She shuddered and said, "When you came groping at the door tonight, Collin, I thought one of them had the key and was coming after me."

He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "That's over now," he said. "Let's move on."

They rode on to the west, avoiding the the trails, apparently free of their pursuers. Great shelves of granite cropped out of hillsides, and boulders as high as a man's head dotted the narrow valleys. Abruptly, they rounded a ledge and found themselves on a north and south trail. Northward, Collin surmised, lay the Austin ranch. To the south, must be the distant town of Larson City. He turned to the north, and a little farther on, as he had expected, the trail curved to the west.

Glancing to his left, he saw a thin fog of dust rising from among the trees and boulders in the valley below and felt a touch of alarm. This was the kind of country where a man could not see what lay around the next turn, but it seemed better to go on than to turn back.

They came into the valley and began to climb the opposite slope. Glancing back, he saw a scattering of cattle edge out into the open and felt a glow of relief. Again he faced forward. For some distance, the trail lay exposed to the valley below. He had a sudden chilling urge to get beyond the next ridge. And then Edith said sharply, "Collin, behind us!" Turning, he saw the three riders swing into an open space.

There was no time to reach the ridge. There was no time to do anything, except sweep Edith from the saddle and carry her to the ground with him ahead of the gunshot hammered out by the crippled Burl Bellham, who rode in front of his two younger brothers.

Lifting his head, Collin took stock of his and Edith's position. Until one or more of the killers circled to the west and climbed above the trail, they were safe. His horse stood nearby, browsing. By acting immediately, perhaps he could save Edith.

She said, "Les is the youngest—the one on the roan. Pete—"

"Listen to me," he broke in. "I'll keep 'em pinned down, while you get in front of my horse and lead him over the ridge. Once you're out of range, ride as hard as you can. You'll come to the Austin ranch. They'll look after you."

"What about you?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Alone, I can take care of myself," he said.

The Bellhams had dismounted and dropped behind scattered boulders.

"On your way," Collin said.

CROUCHING low, the girl ran to the horse. Collin saw the gleam of a gun and sent a shot crashing. The gun vanished. Three more shots, he sent smashing against the boulders. When he stopped to reload, he saw that Edith and the horse had disappeared over the ridge. After that, he saved back his ammunition, knowing he would need it when the Bellhams came at him from above and below.

The sun lifted, and Collin began to feel the heat. An ant crawled across his left hand. Worriedly, he shook it off. Ants could give a man a bad time. The silence below added to his unease.

Now there was no sign of life in the valley, except for the few cattle and the Bellham ponies. Collin hung his hat over his gun and inched it into the air. A gun roared; the hat twitched. At least one of the Bellhams had remained among the boulders to keep him pinned to the trail.

Again his eyes searched for a safer shelter, and he saw a thin outcropping of rock a dozen feet to his right. By squeezing under the rocky shelf, he would be less exposed from a higher point. He picked up a stone and flung it to his left. It lifted a thin trail of dust, and a gun snarled. At the same instant, Collin leaped for the rocky shelf and made it.

He heard Burl Bellham curse angrily and knew that the man had been left behind—probably because of his bad leg—while the other two were circling to some point above his own position. He had a sudden notion that it would soon all be over.

A scattering of rocks dribbled along the slope to his right. Watching intently, he could see no one, but he knew that a Bellham was working his way into a killing position. There was nothing to do but wait, and then make the Bellhams pay as high a price as possible for his life. Then, suddenly, he was hearing a new sound. The clatter of iron-shod hoofs against rocks.

Lifting his head, he had a glimpse of Fred and Ken Austin topping the ridge. Either Edith had met them on the trail, or they had been close enough to hear the shooting. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted a warning.

Immediately gunfire crashed from above and below and was tossed angrily back and forth from one cliff to another. Through the smoke from his own gun, Collin saw Les Bellham stand, fling his arms high and go rolling along the slope. He saw Ken Austin, a smoking gun in hand, leap from his horse and lunge toward a sheltering boulder. Then Burl Bellham stood and fired, and Ken staggered and rolled awkwardly against the boulder. Collin swung his gun on the red-headed man and triggered, but Bellham had dropped back behind his rocky shelter.

Out of sight to his left, Collin heard the angry talk of guns. Fred Austin and Pete Bellham had met. Then Collin caught a glimpse of Burl. The man was making his way toward one of the ponies.

Collin left his shelter then. Sliding, rolling, ignoring bruises and scratches. Burl Bellham saw him coming. He cursed and fired, and a sharp sliver of stone slashed a bloody line across Collin's left cheek.

HE SHOVED to his feet and saw Bellham ducking among the boulders. The chance of hitting him was so remote that Collin held his fire. Now he could see no way to stop the killer, and a frustrating anger filled him. Then his eyes fixed on a crumbling heap of stones near the horse Bellham was attempting to reach. Aiming carefully, Collin set a slug crashing into the stones.

They were flung apart by the blast and they peppered the horse. The animal leaped back in terror, turned and plunged beyond Bellham's reach. The man lunged forward. His bad leg gave away. Cursing with pain and frustration, he sank to the ground.

"Drop your gun!" Collin shouted.

Bellham's hair flamed in a strip of sunlight. His handsome face was distorted with anger and hate.

"Go to hell!" he said savagely and began to shoot.

Collin dropped flat. He saw Bellham's gun swing down for the kill. He had no choice. He squeezed off a single shot and watched the man jerk back and become very still.

Shakily, Collin shoved to his feet and wiped the blood from his face. It had been close, but it was over. Then, glancing back along the slope, he saw Fred Austin hurrying toward

Ken. But now Ken was no longer alone. Edith was on her knees beside him, trying to stop the flow of blood from his right shoulder with her handkerchief, and Ken was looking at her as if she were an angel that had suddenly flown down from the sky.

As Collin climbed toward them, Fred said, "When you didn't show up for breakfast, Ann got worried and went down to your camp. Finding your gear, but not you, she guessed you'd ridden in the night to the Bellham valley. That scared her half to death, and she made us promise to look for you. This is a short cut, so we headed this way and met your sister—"

At that moment, Collin saw old man Bellham come up over the ridge on a foaming horse. He shouted a warning and lifted his gun. But the old man pulled up sharply and sat staring mutely at the scene, his hands folded over the saddle horn.

"I've had a feelin' it was going to end like this, sooner or later," he said dully. "I told 'em so, but they just laughed at me."

He rubbed a hand over his tired eyes.

"Funny how one thing leads to another. A little drinkin'. A little gamblin'. A little rustlin' to get money for the drinkin' and gamblin'. Then a murder to cover up the rustlin'."

"My brother, Jim?" Fred asked in a tight voice.

The old man nodded. "Jim saw Les picking up some steers, and Pete sneaked around behind and shot him. I was afraid—afraid of my own sons. Just stayed in my store—no tellin' what all they've done. Came home with a girl one night two weeks ago—I looked after her the best I could. Afraid to turn her lose. Afraid to tell her brother we had her. Knew they would have killed me and him and her. Afraid. . ."

Clutching the saddle horn to keep from falling, the old man's voice trailed off as he turned his horse and rode toward his empty valley and the store where only an occasional wanderer stopped. No one thought of stopping him.

COLLIN stood with a big shoulder slanted against the wooden tower of Samuel Austin's windmill, a tall, lean man, remembering the past and thinking of the future. Overhead, the stars were glittering jewels in the sky. The old dog, Chaser, had followed him and now nosed his hand.

"Life's a funny business," he said to the old dog.

"What's this about life being a funny business?" Ann asked, stepping out of the shadows and moving toward him.

Her face was a soft, pale oval in the darkness, and he could see the woman-shape of her and feel her presence.

He chuckled and said, "I find my sister, and the next thing I know, I'm losing her to a blond-headed boy with a bullet hole in his shoulder and a twinkle in his eyes."

Ann laughed softly. "And Ken always said he hated girls. Collin, it's going to be a lovely wedding."

Collin drew a deep breath. He'd been waiting almost a week to tell her what was in his mind. Now that he had the chance, he wasn't quite sure how to begin.

"Seems kind of a waste to have a preacher and a fiddler and all those guests you've invited come so far for just one measly little wedding," he said. "Now, if you and I were to make a double wedding out of it—"

She smiled and lifted her face, which was answer enough for Collin, and he drew her close and kissed her.

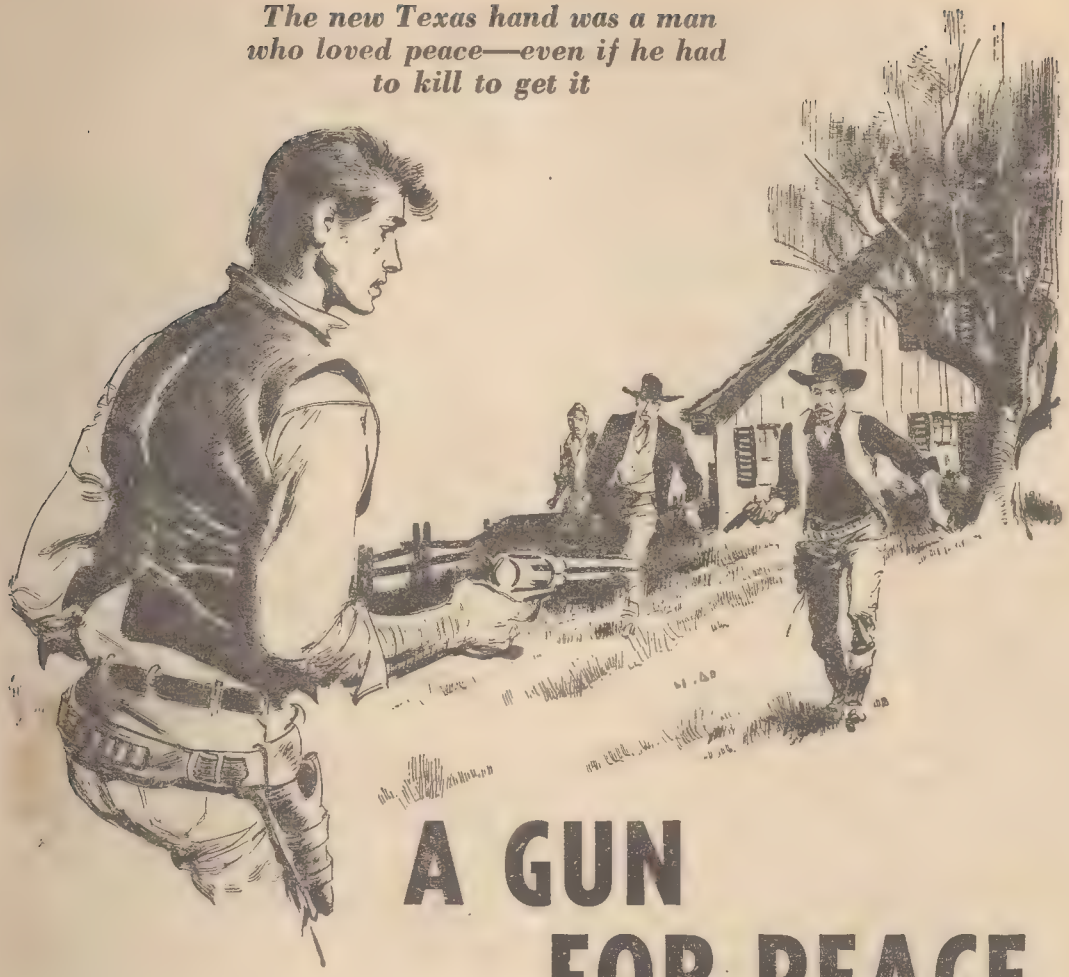
Coming in the Next Issue

GUNFIGHT AT BENT FORK, By Philip Morgan

OUTLAW HERITAGE, By Foy A. Blackburn

WHISPERS IN THE LAND, By Norman Wells

The new Texas hand was a man who loved peace—even if he had to kill to get it



A GUN FOR PEACE

BY WAYNE MAC VAUGH

RIM FIRE'S new rider sat his horse at the head of Salt Creek, his mind filled with the thoughts of the past.

"You better move along, Texas," called another rider good naturedly. "Willy Pete don't like new hands bein' late for chow."

The man from Texas gave old Jeff Simpson an absent sort of grin. He hunched in his saddle, numb with unaccustomed weariness. He gazed down along the swift water to where Goblin's Canyon opened up in a lush meadow. His eyes, deep set above sharp cheek bones, lost some of their cold sheen in an expression as close to contentment as they'd ever been. They focused on a tight cluster of graying buildings nestled against a thousand foot backdrop of sandstone cliffs. Deep in grass and bordered by massive cottonwoods lay Rim Fire ranch; his first honest-to-goodness job.

This was Utah Territory, ruggedly beautiful and remote—a far cry from the Texas brush country and its post Civil War violence.

"It's real peaceful country," he muttered to himself, "and I aim to be a real peaceful cowboy. I'll kill the man that stands in my—" he caught himself and grinned wryly.

The ringing of a sledge against an iron wheel rim echoed off the cliffs and rolled faintly

across the meadow. The man called Texas straightened eagerly and urged his horse into an easy gait down the trail.

By the time he'd unsaddled and washed up, the rest of the crew had finished supper. They lounged about the table listening to Jim Markley. Markley, Rim Fire's owner, was a little oldster with a hanging mustache that added a mournful touch to an already mournful countenance.

"Roy wants you to start your drive before sunup tomorrow," Markley was saying in an apologetic way. His watery blue eyes clung to his empty plate, never raising to any of the faces about him.

Texas served himself from the scanty remains of the main dishes. He ate slowly, his pale eyes shrewdly prying at the other men. It was a strange crew. All old men like Markley, they seemed to fit the surroundings like pieces of old furniture; dilapidated but still sound of body.

Markley's instructions seemed to irritate Jeff Simpson. He growled and turned his chair about so as to straddle the seat with his skinny legs. He thrust his long, homely face at Jim Markley and his sun enflamed eyes bore angrily at the boss.

"Is Scorp goin' to be on hand for this drive or is he goin' to be too busy again?"

Jim Markley raised pleading eyes at Jeff. "I don't know, Jeff," he said. "He's due back from Monument today and I'll ask him."

"Ask him hell. You oughta tell him!" snapped Jeff. "A foreman's supposed to work with his crew. I ain't seen him for two weeks. In fact," Jeff stabbed a thick thumb toward Texas, "this new man ain't never seen him!"

Jim Markley's face took on added color at Jeff's outburst but his eyes dropped and his remark was scarcely audible in the tense room.

"That's all, men," Jim said. "Have your gear ready to move out with the herd in the morning."

The crew shuffled out, leaving Texas to finish his supper and Jeff and Jim Markley staring at each other. Before Markely retired to his own quarters, deep in the big house, he walked up and gripped Jeff Simpson's bony shoulder.

"Don't cross him, Jeff. I don't want to see anyone get hurt, especially you."

Texas carefully ignored the by-play. He capped his supper with a slab of apple pie that the cook put before him. "I appreciate your service, Willy," he said. "I'll try to be on time after this."

Willy Pete ducked his head of gray wool in recognition of the courtesy. "You all's a Texas man, suh, just like me. We gotta stick t'gather." Willy's grin split his face.

This brought a grunt from Jeff Simpson. "Get out your banjo for Tex here and whang out a few numbers."

The old cook's eyes opened up till they looked like two cotton balls in a dish of chocolate pudding. "Yes, suh!" He smiled. "An' you know what, Mistah Texas? Mistah Scorp's gonna pick up my new mail order lesson today. Yes, suh, man, I is gettin' my next lesson today."

Willy Pete disappeared in the kitchen and Jeff turned to Texas with a sly wink. "Willy plays by ear mostly but he's takin' lessons so's he can learn to read them little music notes."

The Texan nodded. He could understand a man wanting something better for himself.

Willy Pete was in his glory, sitting there at the table with the two cowhands, picking away on his old five stringer. The rapt expression on his face more than made up for the lack of musical skill. You could see in the soft brown eyes that Willy was back trackin' through the years and was sitting on the step of a ramshackle cabin somewhere in Texas.

WILLY played for quite a spell before a shadow laid its ominous cast on the group and stilled his nimble fingers. Willy looked up with a mixture of hope and doubt.

Texas's back was toward the door and with the creaking of the doorsill, he pivoted slowly in his chair. The squat, heavy figure of a man blocked out the dusky light of the finished day. There was no change in the Texan's face to indicate his opinion of the newcomer. His eyes flicked for a moment to the holstered .45 on the man's tight trousered leg and there was a hint of speculation in their depths.

Jeff pulled his lank frame to a stand just as the other took his seat. "Roy, this is our new hand. He calls himself Texas." Jeff

nodded his head towards the squat man and there was the touch of bitterness in his voice." Tex, this here is Roy Scorp, Rim Fire's foreman."

Roy Scorp ignored the extended hand. His eyes, squinting between heavy lids, glanced lightly over Texas. He grunted, "Howdy," and that was all.

Willy Pete hovered nearby, a shy grin showing his white teeth, and it seemed to annoy the heavy shouldered foreman. He swung half way around in his chair and swore violently.

"What the hell are you standing around for?" he snarled.

Willy crumpled and Jeff spoke up quietly, "Willy's lookin' for his music lesson, Roy."

There was cruel amusement in the fat face. "Oh, he is, huh? Well, I didn't get it! He wastes too damn much time on that fool banjo."

Roy reached out his big paw and snatched the instrument from Willy's grasp and whipped it above his head as though to slam it against the wall. Jeff's voice cut into his malicious fun.

"Put it down, Roy! Put it down, I say." His voice cracked and his face was ashen. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Roy. It wouldn't of hurt you none to pick up Willy's music while you were in town. Why don't you give the guy a break?"

Texas stared bleakly at Jeff. The tension between the two men was all too familiar. He slid his chair back and braced himself.

Roy Scorp's face was red and his brows arched high to show his momentary surprise. Then suddenly his fat face exploded into a snarling mass. The bull like shoulders bunched, fit to burst the seams in his white shirt. There was the blur of a meaty arm and Jeff went down with a crash; all loose like a bundle of dry sticks. Roy stood over the downed cow-puncher and his right hand slapped hard on the butt of the .45.

It was then that Texas felt the sudden familiar twinge in his own right arm and his hand flashed to the holster that wasn't there. His fingers closed tightly and then sprang open; convulsed like the empty jaws of a coyote that missed a jack. Beads of sweat bejeweled his face and the fire within him simmered and cracked. The knuckles on his left hand were white as he gripped the table for support, trying to decide whether to throw his own lean body into the fight or whether to hold to his vow to stay out of trouble.

Roy glared down at the old cowboy. "I've been waiting for you to make a break like this, Simpson," he said, his thick lips pulling back off of strong teeth. "I told you before about butting into my business, now get out! You're fired!"

Jeff slowly pulled his length to a stand. Blood streamed from a smashed lip. "It ain't that easy, Roy," he said bitterly. "I've been riding for Rim Fire a lot of years; long before you bulled your way in to rob Jim Markley."

Roy Scorp's head went back and his raucous laughter slammed against the rafters. Then, he shut it off and his face turned vicious.

"Maybe you'd like to argue the point?" Roy said, and tapped the .45's bone handle significantly.

The expression in Jeff's wide eyed stare as he watched the tapping fingers was like that of a kid that's stomped at a rattler and missed. He turned toward the door.

"It ain't worth dying for, I reckon," Jeff said and left.

TEXAS got up from the table and followed Jeff out. He hesitated on the vine covered veranda and breathed deeply of the Utah night. The fresh scent of pine filled the air and relaxed his furrowed brow. The sudden flare of a match out by the corral drew his attention and he walked across the yard to where Jeff Simpson was sitting dejectedly.

In the blue light of the night Jeff's face was long and mournful in its cast. He didn't acknowledge the Texan's greeting, but just sat there, seemingly fascinated by the glowing end of his smoke. His lips moved but his voice was distant as though he was talking to himself.

"Poor Willy," he said with that distant voice. "That damn music lesson means more to him than a month's pay. Lousy stinker, that Roy Scorp. Went right past the post office, too!"

Texas pulled himself up on the top rail and in the soft darkness he looked like a little boy

along side of the big gaunt frame of Jeff Simpson.

"What's it all about, Jeff?" he asked.

The oldster didn't answer for a moment or two and Texas half expected to be told to mind his own damned business. Then Jeff began to talk and he poured forth a story so unbelieveable it was ridiculous. The gist of it was simply that a tough, gun slinging stranger named Roy Scorp had ridden into Rim Fire one day two years ago and had sold Jim Markley a bill of goods.

"It's a good range, Tex," said Jeff Simpson. "And old Jim's got no heirs. Scorp was shrewd enough to see the possibilities and he's tough enough to carry out his plans."

Contempt edged the Texan's drawl. "What kind of men are you Utahs anyhow?" He slid off the rail and moved stiffly backwards, putting distance between them.

If Jeff noticed the move he didn't show it. He seemed lost in bitter thought. "Ten years ago we'd of thrown him off the place but this is like an old man's home. There's not a man here under sixty. The fight went out of us a long time ago."

The Texan's bright eyes studied Jeff. "Have you got a gun?" he asked.

Jeff nodded absently. "Yeah, some where."

"Then use it!"

Jeff swung his eyes to Texas and they were big and staring. "All of us together wouldn't stand a chance."

"Why not?" Texas asked curiously.

Jeff's angry face pushed close to the other. "You got a hell of a lot to learn, kid," he snapped. "Do you know who that man is?"

Texas, his eyes dancing with sudden interest, shook his head. "No."

"What part of Texas did you say you was from, kid?"

"I don't recollect saying," Texas said cautiously.

Jeff, annoyance furrowing his brow, shrugged and said, "Well, it don't make any difference. Did you ever hear of the Kingfisher?"

Suddenly, for the man called Texas, the world was too small. He tried to keep his voice low and unconcerned. "Does he claim to be the Kingfisher?"

Jeff looked oddly at the young puncher as though he was noticing something for the first time. Maybe it was the blue eyes that shown out of the thin face like two bearings of wet blue steel.

"No, but he claims that he rode with the Kingfisher's border gang. He says he had a run-in with him three-four years back and beat him to the draw."

"Well, now," Texas said softly and there was a bit of mischief in his cold eyes. "That makes him quite a man, don't it? It's funny though, I could of sworn I saw the Kingfisher not more than three months ago down around Austin; him and his pal Ben Thompson."

Jeff shrugged his high shoulders. "I only know what he claims, kid."

"The man's a liar," the Texan said grimly.

Jeff remained silent, his eyes fingering the shadowed face. "Maybe so," he said finally, "but I ain't the one to call him on it." With that, he started for the bunkhouse leaving Texas to wonder if he'd shown his hand.

LEANING against the corral, Texas absently rolled a smoke while he toyed with the idea of making a glory play; really give them a show. The grin faded. He'd traveled this far from gunsmoke and he reckoned he could keep right on traveling. Let Jeff take care of himself.

Texas watched Willy Pete come out of the cook shack that stuck out from the rambling main house like an ugly wart. The light from the doorway shown on the glistening black face as Willy tossed the dishwater into the yard. The distance between the two men wasn't more than twenty feet and Texas read the tragic past of the cook in the reflection of the lamplight. He moved as though the shackles of slavery were still upon him.

The whining bark of a lonely coyote high up on the canyon's rim drifted out over the meadow, its ghostly sound lingering in the night and filling Texas with apprehension. He moved away from the corral. Once more he looked at Willy Pete's moving shadow and the urge to help the man was strong.

Five minutes later and riding a fresh mount, Texas let himself through the big sweep-gate that crossed Rim Fire's cottonwood lined main entrance and headed south along the wagon

road. Roy Scorp, the bulge of his big body softened in the shadows of the veranda, watched him go; the eyes above his fat cheeks gleaming with speculation.

It was close to three o'clock when Texas returned to the ranch. He entered the cook's shack and laid an envelope on the table close to Willy's bedded figure. Then he slipped out, tired but well satisfied with himself. It had been a long time since he'd done a favor for anyone.

At breakfast, Texas hunched wearily in his chair, scrubbing sleep from his eyes with balled fists. All of Rim Fire's riders, except Jeff Simpson, were present. Willy Pete was full of grins and chuckles as he served up the platters of beef and eggs. He didn't say a thing—just grinned broadly and hummed to himself.

"What the devil's got into you, Willy?" someone growled.

"I is a very happy man this mornin'," Willy sang out. "That Mistah Scorp's a real fine gentleman. Yes suh, he sure is."

The riders all looked at Willy with surprise; not the least of whom was Texas. It suddenly dawned on him that Willy thought Roy had been kidding him when he said that he hadn't brought his music lesson back from Monument. He hadn't bargained for this and he steeled himself for Roy's reaction.

It was everything that Texas expected. The foreman entered the dining room with Jim Markley and he had no sooner sat down than Willy Pete, his big white teeth gleaming, shuffled swiftly to his side.

"I wants to thank you, suh, for bringin' my new lesson. But you shouldn't tease ole folks like me. It's bad for the heart."

Roy Scorp frowned as though trying to figure out what Willy was talking about. Then it seemed to dawn on him and he put both of his thick hands, spread-fingered on the rough pine table top. His face turned from red to a bluish scarlet and his eyes swept about the table. They came to a burning, boring rest on the bleak featured Texan.

"You did it!" he hissed. "You did it! I saw you leave the ranch last night, you meddlesome damn kid." Roy's big paw swung an arc that exploded against the Texan's face. "You're fired!" he roared.

Texas sat stiff and stunned; his face, an ugly white splash showing the imprint of Scorp's backhand, was numb. All heads were turned towards him. Jim Markley, grimness in his old face, looked as though he was about to protest Roy's roughness but then he looked at Texas and his lips compressed with wonder. Perhaps it was because he saw the violence that lay so shallowly buried in the cold blue eyes of his new rider.

SLOWLY—very slowly—Texas stood up; his face a white incarnation of hate. Not until his clawing hand arced for his gun did he remember that he wore none. He gripped the back of his chair and lunged for Roy.

Scorp, fat as he was, sprang nimbly to his feet, his own fat paw grabbing and yanking his .45. "I said that you're fired! Do you want to argue about it?" He dropped the barrel of his gun until the frontsight was aligned with the puncher's belt buckle.

The peaceful life was not for the likes of Texas. He realized that now and he was sorry. He'd tried but this was too much. His little blue eyes flicked to Jim Markley's face and he saw perplexity there. Then they darted back to the fat, confident face of Rim Fire's foreman.

"I said you're fired," Scorp snapped. "Do you want to argue?"

"I reckon I'll argue," drawled Texas, his voice a vigorous purr. There was an audible sigh about the table and a fork dropped to the floor, sending up its offending clatter. Roy Scorp jerked with the racket and his face lost some of its firmness.

Texas pivoted on his heels. "I'll be back," he said and walked from the dining room, brushing past the grinning figure of Jeff Simpson leaning in the doorway....

The feel of the solid weight of the Colt .44 was soothing ointment to the tense, lean muscles of the Texan's leg. Almost daintily, he flipped the big blue-black hogleg from its smooth leather holster and checked its load. He was ready. He stepped from the bunkhouse into the fresh morning light; a figure grotesque in its grimness.

Slowly, his right hand swinging in unison with the fancy ebony handle of the .44, the

gunman walked toward the veranda and its occupants.

A cowhand whistled hoarsely into the still air. "Look at the way he packs that cutter," he said. With that, the man stepped quickly aside. That was enough to scatter the rest of the group. Only Jim Markley remained with Roy Scorp.

Texas stopped a few feet from the porch, his little eyes danced from Roy to Jim. "You'd better move, too, Mr. Markley."

The old man looked Texas over carefully and nodded. He moved out of range, over to where Jeff Simpson was leaning against the now forgotten supply wagon.

Roy Scorp watched Jim go and for a moment there was something akin to fear in his face. Then he lurched heavily toward the lean figure before him. His meaty face was red enough to hurt and his big body quivered and twitched.

"I fired you, you dumb kid. Get out before I burn you down."

"I'm not leaving, Scorp, unless Jim Markley says so," Texas said quietly.

Roy sagged a little, turned and called to Markley with a high pitched whine, "Fire this kid, Markley."

Without looking, Texas felt the sprawling grin on Jim's face. He heard Jeff Simpson chuckle.

Jim Markley shook his head and the smirk on his dried old face was merciless. "You're the foreman," he said. "You've been firin' my men for the last year and you never asked for my help or opinion before." Then, Jim's face cleared of its grin and his mouth became a slit. His eyes held a mischievous glitter. "If you can't back up your own orders then you're the one that's fired!"

Color flooded Scorp's face clear up to his scalp and his big hand clutched the .45. Texas, thinking he was going to gun down Jim Markley, tensed for his own draw but Scorp seemed to change his mind and he swung about to face the youngster again.

Roy was scared—scared stiff but he would fight. Texas knew this and his right shoulder sagged a little and his hand curled and drew back slightly. Rats are vicious when they're cornered and Roy Scorp was cornered.

"I'll kill you, kid! Nobody stands up to Roy Scorp and lives!" he snarled.

The kid's grin was a death mask and his answer dug viciously at the big man. "Not even the Kingfisher, I understand."

Roy's eyes opened a trifle wider. He studied the ominous figure for a moment. "That's right," he said.

"You're a liar, Roy! You never saw the Kingfisher."

Scorp's world was tumbling down. He screamed crazily and his .45 leaped upward.

This was an old game to the man from Texas. It was old scenery in an old play and he'd played the part so many times that his act was automatic. The big ebony handled Colt Frontier six-shooter arced and spat out its thunderous murder. Roy Scorp let out a rasping grunt and pitched face down in the dirt while the reports of the .44 crashed off the cliffs and rocketed out over the grass lands.

Bitterness and disappointment nagged at the gunman from Texas but when he looked from the crumpled, bloody figure of his victim to the grinning hand clasping figures of Jim Markley and Jeff Simpson a smile broke through his dark thoughts.

Jim Markley, straighter and more clear eyed than the Texan had remembered took Jeff's arm and together they stepped out to shake hands with the gunman. Their smiles were broad and carefree. Willy Pete came from the cook shack, carrying his beloved banjo. He shouted something about playing a victory march.

"You had us all fooled, Tex," Jim Markley said gratefully. "I figured you to be just another jelly spined cowboy like the rest of us here; afraid to face up to Roy Scorp. We ain't proud of ourselves, son, leaving the dirty job for you. We'll make it up to you some way."

Texas was embarrassed by the old man's respectful remarks. "Don't worry about it, Mr. Markley. This is one killing that won't bother my conscience."

With that, the gunman doubled rolled his gun and dropped it smoothly into its holster where the sunlight glittered and danced off a brilliant mother-of-pearl inlay in the ebony handle. It was the little figure of a bird; a crested and long-billed kingfisher.

Curran flung Abby aside and yanked at his gun, and Sam sailed into him

MAN RUNNING

By WILLIAM VANCE

Was he for her, Abby wondered, even if his name wasn't Sam Jones— even if he was running from the law?

"SAM JONES is the name." The tall man introduced himself easily. Too easily, Abby Meadows thought, and knew he was lying to hide a name that might be known.

She knew these things mostly because Sam Jones didn't look like the run of the herd cowboys who asked for a job. He was tall and lean with a brown alert face. His clothes were of dark broadcloth and of a good cut and the boots he wore were expensively hand-stitched.

"You really want a job?" she asked, half-smiling.

"I'm a rider," he said steadily without an answering smile. "I came by to see if I'm the man you're looking for."

He made her feel so young, she felt a twinge of anger rise inside her. He seemed so sure of himself, even if he had looked over his shoulder a number of times since he rode into the ranchyard. The gun under his coat tail seemed too much a part of him.

"You'd be steady? You wouldn't work a few days and drift on? We don't want a drifter." Her unaccustomed sharpness of tone gauged how he affected her.

"No," he said easily. "I'm not a drifter. I spent ten years in my last job. Do you want references?"

She had to laugh then, and she did, a quick, tinkling laugh that held some of her natural gaiety in it. Abby was young, a slim girl with gray eyes and inky dark hair. Her smile went away at the sombre question in his blue eyes.

References couldn't be had too quickly, unless he carried them with him. She was tempted for a moment to find out if such was the case. The ranch was isolated, off the beaten trails. Straight over the ridge fifty miles distant lay the nearest town, Gold Rock. He had come from that direction, riding the handsome clay-bank into the ranchyard and dismounting easily in a way that caught her eyes as she came from the house. Riders seldom came by the Bit — not any more.

The house behind her was old, its once white paint weathered into a gray that blended with the sage beyond the barn, stretching away to the purple mountains. The house was huge and rambling, with a narrow porch on three sides, fancy gingerbread trim, it had a weathered but not a worn look. The corrals and barn beyond the cluster of silvery-leaved cottonwoods had a neat and tidy appearance.

Whether he was a fugitive or not, the man who called himself Sam Jones had rode straight there, from the time she'd first sighted him coming over the cedar ridge. He was there in answer to the note Abby had chalked on the bulletin board in front of Jensen's Livery in Gold Rock. The town wiseacres had looked on with half-grins, knowing she couldn't get needed help in that locality. Not as long as Big Mike O'Day was running things. Only Sam Jones had come and Abby knew he wanted to stay. She knew it with a quick catch in her heart.

Inside, in the parlor that held a big desk and was used as an office, Sam Jones added a few details.

"I'm thirty and I don't drink," he said. He could have said more but his blue eyes were busy, cataloging everything within that room in a manner that added to Abby's disquiet. He was lean and hard-muscled, she could see that. He was tanned. He had the quiet voice, the quiet manner of a man who is completely sure of himself.

"Maybe you won't want to stay," Abby said, in a small voice, after she'd introduced Sam Jones to her grandfather, Amos Jordon, a nut-brown man as erect at seventy as he had been at thirty.

The ranch was the Bit. Her grandfather ran stock on this land and with one hand fought the Indians, and rustlers with the other. Her father had turned it into a horse ranch, breeding cavalry stock. Her father was gone now, and she carried on because he had wanted her to, and because she wanted to do it. The horses they raised were prized by the Army. But she'd had trouble keeping help. She crimsoned as she told Sam Jones that Big Mike O'Day wanted to marry her and that he ran off hired men as fast as she hired them.

"I'll stay," Jones said. "I never raised horses but I've worked around them. And I like them. Maybe I can learn a few things from you." He smiled then, a slow smile that changed the forbiddingness of his manner; it was gone before her surprise.

"There's some fence to ride," Abby said. "You won't get much help from me because I spend a lot of time in the house and on the books. We run a few head of stock, too. For Wild West shows mainly."

He nodded. "All right with me. Not

many people come by here?" He waited for her answer, looking at her intently, as though he could read her thoughts.

"Only buyers," she said dryly. "Mostly military purchasing officers. They come and stay for a few days and then they're gone. We don't have many visitors."

"That's fine," he said.

Abby looked at her hands for a long moment, somehow sad that a man such as he had something behind him. She could see it in the expressionless set of his face, in the way, when he came into the room, he got a solid wall to his back. The quick glances he threw at the door and windows, continually alert. She frowned, trying to fathom Sam Jones. The frown must have reflected indecision to Jones.

"Maybe I don't look like a hand," he said. "But I do know horses. I understand them. How about a trial period? A couple of days and then you make up your mind."

"That wouldn't be fair," she said slowly, a faint flush creeping up her neck and face, adding richness to the warm tones of her skin. She looked at him. "That wouldn't be fair to you."

He shook his head. "I'm willing. You ought to be if I am."

Abby was silent for a long moment.

"It's a deal," she said decisively. "There're a couple of horses in the breaking corral. The last man who handled them probably ruined them. We'll see what you can do with them."

She showed him to a room upstairs. It would be his if he stayed—a high-ceilinged room, with the rustling leaves of the cottonwood brushing coolly against the narrow windows. He looked around at the neatness of it and she could see appreciation in his eyes.

"We've never had a bunkhouse," she said. "All our help has always lived right here with us. The men who live and work here are our friends."

"Your grandfather," Sam Jones said. "He isn't very friendly."

"He isn't hostile," she said, smiling. "That counts for a lot right now."

ABBY went downstairs. Amos was no longer in the parlor. The whinny from the corral outside told her where the old man had gone. She waited and presently Sam Jones came down. He was wearing a wrinkled but clean calico shirt and a pair of faded levis. A good-looking man, she reflected. A competent man too, she decided. She led him out to the corral. Sam Jones seemed relaxed and his watchfulness had vanished. He was not wearing the shiny-worn gunbelt which had somehow seemed menacing to her, even though it had been covered with his coat.

The two horses in the corral were handsome young animals, a gray and a chestnut gelding.

"They'll make a good pair of horses," Sam Jones said.

At the sound of his voice the two horses whirled and pounded to the far side of the enclosure.

"Rope burns on 'em?" Jones asked in his mild voice.

Abby nodded, approvingly. "Our last man wasn't much of a wrangler."

"Just enough to make 'em hard to manage," he muttered. He turned to his own horse and stripped off the gear and led it to a hitchrack.

Jones took his rope off the saddle and ran out a loop. The young horses watched carefully as Jones came through the gate. They raised their tails and pawed the ground, tossing their heads and whistling as though a mountain lion had them cornered.

Suddenly the gray backed his ears and came straight at Jones, all set to run him down. Jones stood with his loop cocked until the horse got close, then stepped lithely aside and picked up the horse's forefeet. Throwing his weight back against the rope, he turned the running animal heels over head.

He went down the rope hand over hand and fell on the horse, avoiding the chopping hoofs, slipped a hackamore from his belt and put it over the weaving head. Then he tied him to the snubbing post.

Abby and her grandfather looked at one

another and she saw that he nodded slightly. A rough way to handle a horse, but this one had been mistreated.

"Look out!" Abby screamed involuntarily.

The big chestnut was making for Jones, his hoofs hammering the corral hardpan. Jones neatly picked up the chestnut's forefeet and threw him harder than the gray had gone down.

The chestnut, snubbed to the post, grew frantic. He lunged against the rope, bawling fear and rage. Rearing high, he tried to walk away. He fell back and lay on the ground, still bawling and lashing out with hind hoofs.

Jones sauntered over to the fence. "In a minute he'll quiet down," he said. "Hate to do it that way but somebody has used 'em wrong." He rolled a quick cigarette and put it between his lips. His brown forehead was beaded with sweat and a dark stain had appeared at his armpits and in the small of his back.

Abby and her grandfather watched him as he picked up the saddle and walked out to the gray. He talked in a low voice and soon the gray seemed to steady. Jones threw the saddle over the horse and the gray bucked it off into the dust.

He did that three times and the third time the gray didn't buck. The horse stood there trembling, as Jones cinched up tight, jerked the snubbing rope loose and stepped to the saddle. He had time to get his feet in the stirrups before the gray switched ends and sunfished toward the fence, his head tucked neatly between his forefeet, his back arched like a great cat.

Jones swayed loosely in the saddle. He didn't rake the gray and he didn't hit at him with his hat. He just rode a straight-up ride. The gray lunged away from the fence and kicked his heels high and it was over. It stood there, sides heaving and Jones rested easily in the saddle, rubbing the sweaty neck, talking in a low, soothing voice.

Amos Jordon rubbed his jaw with his fingers. "Horses like him," he said and went away, toward the barn.

The tall man was leading the gray up and down the corral and he brought the reluctant animal over beside her and held its underjaw, while he stroked the muzzle. "I sort of like horses," he said. "Hate to see 'em mistreated."

"You're doing fine," she said. "Grandfather thinks so, too."

"He isn't very friendly," Jones said.

"He's not unfriendly," she said. "That's a lot — for him." Abby looked up at him and then turned and went to the barn.

The barn had a wooden floor and the aroma of leather and feed came to her as she stood there, looking into the cool, dim interior. The stalls were roomy and clean and a small window opened above each manger. A shiny coated mare with foal whinnied at her. She went back along the run to the office in the corner. There was a roll-top desk here, a big iron safe against the wall. There were shelves of books, a barrel chair and a cot, where a man could rest while waiting on a difficult mare. Amos Jordan was at the desk, bent over a ledger.

"I reckon you're not going to sell to Coffey," Amos said. "Am I correct?"

"You're correct," Abby said.

Amos tilted back in his chair. His eyes were cold. "Our business is selling horses," he said. "Coffey's got the money and will pay."

Abby met the old man's stare. "You," she said slowly, "are an old fraud. You know Chinch Coffey is not a man who can own a horse of ours at any price."

THEY glared at each other and suddenly Amos's white brows lifted, showing eyes filled with warm good humor. He fumbled for his pipe and began filling it. His eyes grew serious. "That fellow is a poor liar, Abby."

"He mustn't have had much practice," she said quickly.

"Sam Jones." The old man shook his head and lit his pipe. "It'll be a while before he'll learn to answer to the name like he owned it."

"He was slow," Abby said.

"Fine lookin' man," Amos said. "Good

lines, good breeding. Knows how and what to do. Feller like that doesn't have to handle horses for a living—not way out here with me and you. He's afraid of something, girl. He's looking for a place to hide." He looked at Abby. "Did you ask him about that?"

"I certainly did not."

Amos scowled. "Why not?"

"You taught me," she said simply. "I'll repeat what you've said. A man's past doesn't always matter. It's what he is now and what he does here and now that counts. Do you remember?"

"Not those exact words," Amos said.

"But they mean the same," she said.

"You'll let him stay, knowing he's on the dodge?"

"We need a man to work the horses," she said. "Not a preacher. The only thing he needs for the job is the ability. If he's got the ability he can have it as long as he wants it. Or until he gives us a reason to fire him."

"If he's hiding," Amos said, "he's hiding from trouble. That can't be done, Abby. Sooner or later, it finds you. It'll come here. It'll find him."

"Until it does," Abby said, "They're his own."

Amos frowned thoughtfully. "And there's the law—have you thought about that?"

"I have," Abby said. "I don't think we ought to condemn him like this."

Abby and Amos waited together, that evening, in the front room of the big old house. Abby kept glancing at the clock standing against the wall audibly marking off the seconds. "I told him supper was at six," he said. "You don't suppose he—he's gone."

Amos's brown gaunt face wore an expression of casual carelessness. His expression said that he had no interest in the matter; that Sam Jones could come or go and it would not bother him. But his expression was wrong. Abby knew the old man put on that poker face for everything that happened. Underneath his indifference he wanted people to have their wishes come true.

The sound of boots on the front porch startled them both, even though they had been listening for them. Sam Jones stepped through the door and paused uncertainly.

"Go on and wash up," Abby said crisply. "Supper's waiting."

He didn't answer her at once and then he said, "The two horses, I think they're going to be all right."

Amos's sharp glance was on his granddaughter's face as she looked at Sam Jones. At the look Sam Jones gave her. He cleared his throat unnecessarily loud and said, "Supper's gettin' cold, uh—Sam."

Jones looked at Amos, nodded shortly and stepped across the room to the stairs.

Abby waited until the sound of his boots died away and then she said, "You didn't have to stutter over his name."

"Who, me?" Amos asked too innocently. "Come on, gal. Let's eat."

"We'll wait," Abby said severely, "until he comes down."

At the table which was covered with a freshly ironed cloth, Sam Jones devoted himself to the food and not without appreciation, Abby noted with gratification. She was glad she'd cleaned the silver and polished the glasses.

"You're really a good cook," Jones said, and he left the table.

Abby eyed her grandfather across the remains of a meal she's labored at most of the afternoon. "He knows the difference between a knife and fork," she said.

"That makes him all right," Amos said imperturbably.

"The job is his—if he'll stay," she said defiantly.

"All right, all right," Amos said. "But listen, Abby. Shin Walters rode by this afternoon. I told him to ask Herb for supper tomorrow night."

Her face flamed. "You did! I know why, Amos, and I think you're awful." She rose and leaned across the table. "And I'm going to tell him right now."

He smiled benignly. "All right, Abby," he said gently. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

She found Jones seated on the front porch with his feet against a post. He drew in on his cigarette as she came to him and the dark outlines of his face remained in her memory when he took the cigarette away and rose.

"Keep your seat," she said. "I just wanted to tell you—we'll have someone for supper tomorrow night."

She had an impression then of sudden tenseness, of stillness, of a warm calm before a storm. But he said, "Yes?"

"The sheriff," she said. "He'll be here tomorrow night."

The cigarette made a red arc in the night. "I'll check that filly," he said, "and then hit the hay. If you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," she said and watched him go down the steps and disappear in the darkness toward the barn. She felt a dull ache somewhere deep inside of her.

AN UNEXPECTED visitor arrived before Sheriff Herb Walters. Big Mike O'Day. He rode in around noon on a lathered horse that told he'd come from Gold Rock in a hurry. He left the heaving animal and tramped up the steps.

"Heard you had a new hand," he scowled. He was a big man with a black mustache, sideburns and thick through the shoulders and chest, with high color, black eyes and no patience in him for anyone.

"That I have," she said, her serenity as false as her smile.

"Where is he?"

"Don't shout at me," she said coldly. "He's working. Where else?"

"It's my normal tone," Big Mike said loudly. He threw his cigar over his shoulder and continued to scowl at her. "He won't last, Abby. Just like the others. You can't get a good man to stay out here at the end of the world."

"He's doing fine," she said and wrinkled her forehead at the weary horse at the stepping block. "You've used that horse, Mike."

"That's what it's for," he said.

Sam Jones came around the corner and his stride broke and he halted, his eyes wary.

Big Mike's head turned quickly. "Ho," he said loudly. "This the saddle bum you got working for you now, Abby?"

Abby made a distasteful face. "Go away," she said, low-voiced.

Sam Jones took a few tentative steps forward. "I wonder," he said, "Have you any scrap leather, brads and maybe a few tools I could use to patch leather?"

She told him where the articles could be found while Mike O'Day looked on, grinning hugely.

Sam Jones hesitated, looking at Abby after she'd finished. She desperately wanted him to leave but she didn't say it.

"Abby's had a lot of hired help," O'Day said, chuckling. "They didn't last long, feller—uh, what'd you say your name was?"

Abby gasped at this breach of local etiquette.

"I didn't say," Sam Jones said quietly.

"Abby got you all trained? She's purty fast. Has to be account they don't last long around here." He laughed. His black eyes held no part in the laughter, though. They sought out Jones, smouldering. "I don't know why she messes with a rundown old ranch. Good-lookin' gal like her, she —"

"Mike!" Abby said loudly.

"A woman like her, she'd be a lot better off —"

O'Day didn't finish. He couldn't. He didn't have time to raise his guard before Sam Jones glided across the space that separated them and lashed out with his fist. O'Day staggered backward, his lip beaded with blood. He roared angrily and bored in with his fists pumping like a kicking horse. Sam Jones gave with the rush until the momentum of the big man diminished and then he slashed out again, driving O'Day to his knees and then Abby was between them.

"No, no!" she cried. "Stop it! I won't have it!"

Big Mike O'Day climbed to his feet. "All right, Abby," he said softly, but his eyes were wild. "All right, honey. I told

you once before, and I'll tell you now. You've about run your luck out!" He turned away, spun back and snapped, "You want to make a little bet about how much longer you got a hired man?"

He lumbered down the steps and lunged toward his horse. Abby didn't watch him go. She was standing, small fists clenched. "Why didn't you just go back to work?" Her eyes filled and she flung his hand from her arm and went into the house.

Sam Jones stood there for a moment and then he walked slowly back toward the barn.

That evening Herb Walters came. He was a tall man, rawhide tough, with sandy unkempt hair and sharp gray eyes. He wore the garb of a cowman and the star on his vest seemed incidental. Sam Jones understood the sheriff was there because of him. He said no word about it but there was an added sternness to the set of his jaw and his eyes sparked dangerously. The sheriff paid no more attention to Jones than he did the others after his first remark.

"Story's going around," he said, "Big Mike got a licking. He came in with a black eye and that's no hearsay. I saw it."

Not one of them volunteered to answer and the conversation drifted to other things. And when the sheriff was gone, Sam Jones came into the tidy kitchen.

"You thought maybe the law wanted me?" he asked.

"I didn't know," she said quietly. "I don't know much about you, not even your name."

He tensed for a moment at that and Abby straightened her shoulders and said, "Let me finish, please. Who you are and why you want to stay here is your business. You're not wanted by the law. If Herb does get any information, he knows where to find you—that's the end of that. Now it's all right with us. If you want our help for anything, you've but to ask because you're one of us now. Amos and I both hope you stay for a long time."

"That's big of you," he said bitingly. "I hope you'll pardon me for not getting a load off my chest."

"Whatever you say," Abby said quietly, "Sam Jones is all right with me — us — if it is with you."

Whatever his name, whatever his troubles, Sam Jones kept them to himself and in the weeks that followed he became the indispensable man. He was quick and willing and strong. He seemed to know intuitively what she wanted done and have it finished before she could ask him to do it. It was as though he made the Bit his own and that's how Abby, and Amos, wanted it.

"I don't know how I've done without him this long," she would tell Amos.

Amos would then make one of his guesses about Sam Jones's past. "He's a good man, Abby. He'd never do a thing he didn't think right. I just wonder—"

"He doesn't talk about it," she said. "I'll bet he keeps quiet because he just doesn't want to bother us with his troubles." She sighed. "He'll have to go to town some day. And I hate to think about it."

Amos looked at her and saw the thing he'd dreaded since Sam Jones arrived at the Bit. "Right," he said.

THAT day got there though, the day she'd dreaded. Amos was down with rheumatism and she had supplies to buy and errands to run. She could have gone herself but she deliberately made herself ask him. She asked Sam Jones to make the fifty mile trip to Gold Rock, hoping all the time he'd refuse. She tried to tell herself that it was only because he was a good worker and she didn't want to lose him. But she knew it wasn't all true. She knew too that Big Mike O'Day wasn't forgetting a thing, most of all the blows Sam Jones had landed on him.

She went out to the barn and found Sam in one of his infrequent idle moments. He sat at the rolltop desk staring at his hands. They were brown and supple hands.

She said, "Sam, could you go to Gold Rock for me?"

He swung around and stared at her for a moment with an odd light in his blue eyes. "I guess. If you want me to." He shoved to his feet and went across the room and got his hat. "I'll saddle my horse."

"Come by the house," she said, her even voice not betraying her inward shakiness. "I'll give you the shopping list."

"The list?" He set the hat on his head and thumbed it back in a characteristic gesture. "Do you want me to take the buckboard?"

She shook her head. "Not that much. The most important thing is medicine for Amos."

"I hope he'll get to feeling better," he said and went out to saddle his horse. Abby returned to the house and Amos called from his bedroom. She went in to see him.

"Is Sam going?" Amos asked. His brown face was pale with the pain of his swollen joints.

She nodded. "He's saddling now."

"Maybe he'd better not go," the old man said fretfully. "Maybe I'll get to feeling better."

"Not without the medicine," she said.

"We could see."

"You didn't sleep last night," she said. "You've got to get some rest, grandfather."

He sighed. When she called him grandfather he knew arguments would be of no avail. "All right, girl," he said gruffily. "Just — well, just tell him to be careful."

"I don't have to tell him that," she said and turned and left the room.

Sam Jones came down the stairway and she saw with a small shock that he wore the shiny-worn gunbelt. He saw the look on her face and hesitated and then turned and tramped up the stairs. When he came down again he was not wearing the gun. His brown face was expressionless as he accepted the list. She listened to the sound of the claybank's hoofbeats out of hearing. Then Amos called again and she went in to him.

She got his pipe for him and she propped him up in bed.

"Sit down, girl, right here," he said and indicated a place on the bed beside him. She obediently sat down.

"You shouldn't of done it," he said, holding the warm pipe in his two hands, deriving comfort from it. "Sending him into town that way."

"He left his gun. He left his gun behind, here. He hasn't worn it since he came to us, Amos."

"He missed it for a spell," the old man said slowly. "Now he don't. He went to town without it. That says that maybe whatever he run from ain't behind him any longer."

"Or that he'll die rather than run again." The way she said it in a desperate tone caused Amos to look at her sharply.

He nodded and then in a gentle voice, "What is it, girl?"

"This won't surprise you," Abby said, "because you're you." She met his eyes. "Whatever he is, whatever he's done, whatever his name, I want him. For my husband. I want him and none other."

"That," said the old man, "is fine. Has he spoken to you?"

"No. And he won't. Not until —"

Amos rubbed his dry hands together, his keen old eyes searching her face. "What is it, girl? The truth?"

She didn't meet his gaze, but kept her eyes on her hands. "I sent him to Gold Rock. I could have gone myself. But the waiting—I couldn't take it. So I sent him."

Amos sat with his head bent a moment. "He came running. We both knew that. But he wasn't afraid, girl. It wasn't fear that brought him to us. Here's the way I've finally got it figured. Our boy Sam is a lawman, a marshal maybe. He has used that gun for law and order, girl. I know the mark of them and he's one. That gun of his was maybe the only law and the word goes around. A gun-slinging sheriff or marshal keeps some of the bad element away. But there's another breed of cat that comes looking for him and Sam Jones was a man sick of matching his gun against another's."

"Maybe you're right," Abby said.

"Sure I'm right. But look at it this way. He can't stay here forever without leaving the place. He's going to face everyone in this county sooner or later."

"He went to town without his gun," Abby said.

Amos shrugged his thin old shoulders. "All right. He knew what he was doing."

THEY became aware that they were not alone at the same time. The man in the doorway was big, well made. He had ragged, sand-colored hair and small green eyes, deepset and animal-like. His short upper lip gave a cruel, sullen slant to his mouth.

"Where is he? And don't lie to me." The man's voice was loud.

"He's not here," Abby said automatically. "I don't know when he'll be back."

He lounged into the room. "You don't mind if I wait, do you?"

"Yes," Amos said from the bed. "I do mind, stranger. I mind a man butting his way into my home. Get out!"

The big man laughed but there was no mirth in the sound. He was looking at Abby. "What do you say to that, miss?"

She took a step toward him. "I say the same thing he does. You'd better go now."

"I'll wait in here," he said. "He won't be expecting me. That'll make it even. My wife wasn't expecting to die when she did."

She caught her breath. "Your—your wife?" Her voice faltered and her heart began a slow, painful hammering.

"Steady, girl," Amos murmured. "Steady. He might be lying."

"My name" the big man said, "is Curran, not that it matters. And his name is Sam Fair. What name did he use here?"

Amos and Abbey were silent. They waited and the big man went on in a monotone. "He killed her. It don't matter the bullet was meant for me. It got to her. She's dead and soon now Sam Fair will be dead, too."

"What law were you breaking?" Abby asked in a cold voice.

"So you know he's a marshal? An ex-marshal. He told you that?"

"He told us nothing," Abby said. She could smell the reek of whisky now, on Curran's breath. He'd been drinking but he wasn't drunk. And when Sam returned and came riding into the place that had been a refuge for him—but he'd see the other's horse. He'd see the the stranger's horse. She felt a ray of hope as she moved to the window and looked out. There was no mount at the stepping block. She turned.

"Where's your horse," she said.

Curran chuckled. "I put it up," he said with a certain satisfaction in his voice. "I had a rough trip, chasing after Sam. Knew I'd catch up sometime, though because I had to. Would never have located him if I hadn't gotten a tip from a fellow named O'Day."

Abby bit her lip. So Big Mike had found a way to even things up. She looked at Amos and she felt tears near the surface. She blinked them back.

Curran's eyes and voice were almost dreamy. "I knew I'd catch him, ever since that day at my cabin on Lincoln Creek. He come riding up to my door, big as you please. 'Get your horse, Curran,' he says. 'You're going into town to answer to a charge of murder.'" He laughed softly. "Just think. A squatter killed and the marshal was going to arrest me for murder. I got out my gun before he did but he slid off his horse and shot from between the horse's legs. Just then Lil ran out the door. She caught the bullet."

"It was an accident," Abby said. "It was an accident. He'd never do a thing like that on purpose."

Curran's deepset green eyes were on her, curious yet knowing. "You like him, don't you?"

She walked straight to him. "Go away," she said shrilly. "Get out before I scratch your eyes out!"

Curran put his hands on her shoulders while Abby tried to twist out of his grasp and Amos struggled against his pain to get out of his bed.

A quiet voice said, "Take your hands off that girl."

No one had seen Sam come into the room. He was standing there with a look of killing rage on his face. He was a man ready to kill.

Curran flung Abby aside and yanked at the gun on his hip and Sam surged into him, flinging him into the wall, his forearm against Curran's throat, while they fought for possession of the gun. A low moan of anguish came from Abby and she rushed at Curran and tried to help Sam. The two big men threshing about knocked her to the floor. They crashed down together, rattling the dishes on the bureau and then Sam rose with Curran's gun in his hand.

"Get up and get out," he said in a cold, raging voice.

"You can kill me here," Curran said.

"I'm not going to kill you. I just want you to ride on, Curran, and leave me alone." There was desperation in his voice and it tore at Abby's heart.

"I'll never quit trying," Curran said doggedly.

"Go on out and get your horse," Sam said in a thin voice.

The two of them went through the door. Amos and Abby heard them go through the front room, head the door slam.

Amos's face was taut, sweating. He said, "Help me out of here, girl."

She whirled on him. "If anyone does it, I will," she said, her voice breaking. She went across the room and got the carbine out of the wall cabinet. She levered a shell into the chamber and went out through the kitchen.

"Abby!" Amos called.

She didn't stop. At the back door she began running, holding the rifle in her two hands, with her thumb on the hammer. She couldn't see well because her eyes were blinded by her tears.

She felt rough hands on her arms and Sam was shaking her gently. She shook her head and dashed the tears away. Curran sat his horse, looking down at her with a sombre look in his eyes. His small green eyes went from her to Sam and he shook his head in a bewildered manner. Then he spoke to his horse and moved out away from the barn.

Sam said, "He won't come back." He was silent for a long moment while Curran's figure grew smaller. "I hated to have this happen," he said. "Bit was a quiet and peaceful place until I got here. I spoiled it for you."

"Please, Sam," Abby said.

"It's all finished," Sam said heavily. He walked into the barn.

Abby followed him. Sam was pulling his saddle from its accustomed place. "I don't want you to leave us—me," she said.

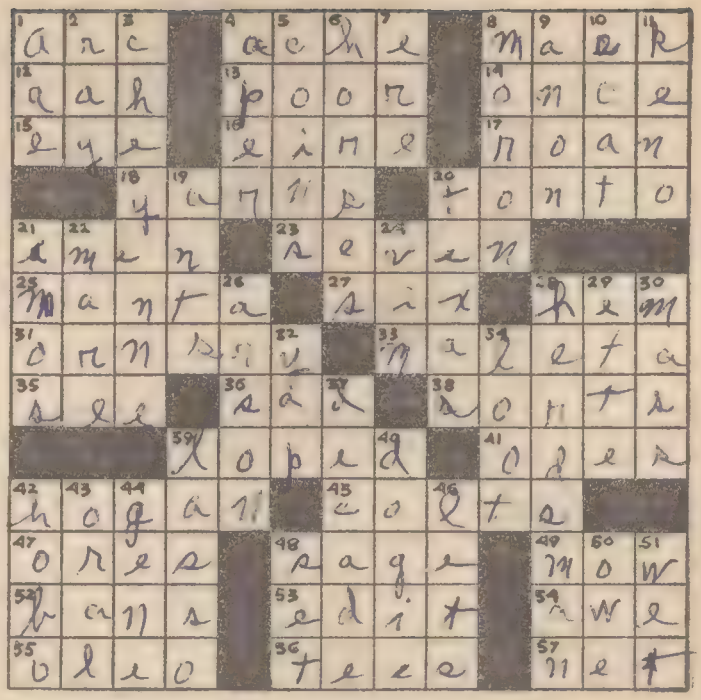
Sam turned slowly with the saddle across his two forearms. "You don't know—"

"But I do! Curran told us what happened. It wasn't your fault. I want you to stay."

He dropped the saddle and stepped toward her and she moved into the shelter of his arms.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution of this puzzle appears on page 95.



ACROSS

1 Curved line
4 Dull pain
8 False face
12 Cheering shout
13 Opposite of rich
14 One time
15 Organ of sight
16 Irish Republic
17 Coloring of horses
18 Tall tales
20 The Lone Ranger's Indian pal
21 Prayer ending
23 Four plus three
25 Horse blanket
27 Half a dozen
28 Skirt edge
31 Hard to manage
33 Saddle bag
35 To observe
36 Unhappy
38 Kinds, varieties
39 Galloped slowly
41 Poems
42 Navajo Indian lodge
45 Young horses
47 Metallic rocks
48 Western shrubbery plant
49 To cut, as grass
52 Prohibits
53 To prepare for publication
54 Solemn fear
55 Short for oleomargarine
56 Golf mounds
57 Fishing snare

DOWN

1 Have being
2 Beam of light
3 Clint Walker's TV Western role
4 One who apes
5 Nickels and dimes
6 Mustangs
7 Before
8 Very stupid person
9 Soon
10 Begone, cat!
11 Form of lotto
19 Poker stake
20 The Lone Star state
21 Partner of Andy
22 Colt's mother
24 Vigor
26 Malicious burning
28 Cowboy
29 Suffix meaning "small"
30 Church service
32 To yelp
34 Booty
37 Ten-year period
39 Cowboy's rope
40 Motherless calf
42 Tramp
43 Verbal
44 —— Autry, cowboy
46 Allows
48 Matched group
50 To be in debt
51 Soaked

TOP HAND

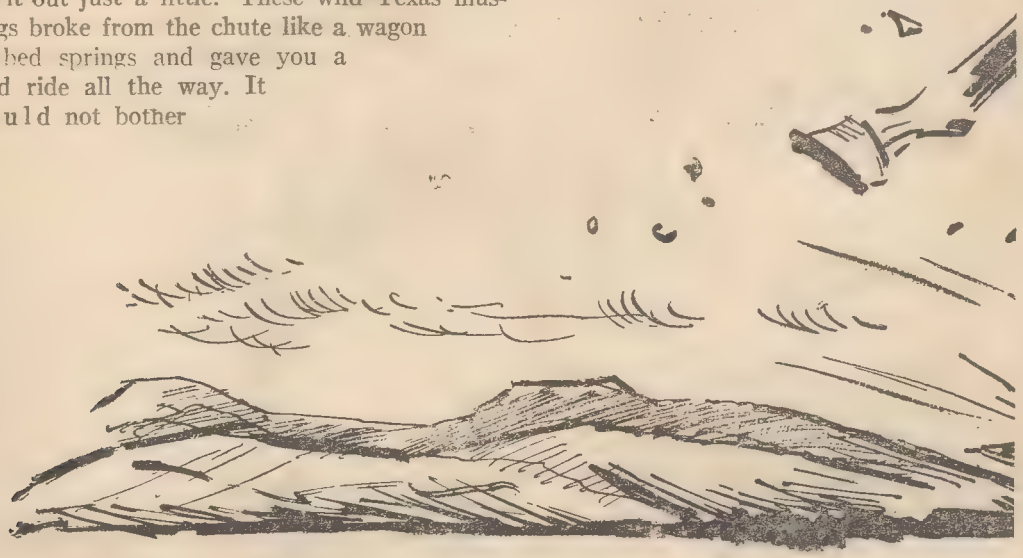
When even Julie doubted Clint, hell came at dusk on the Spur Delta

BY LEW THOMPSON

CHOKING swirls of corral dust lifted around Spur Delta's top hand, Clint Guthrie, and sweat ran down his face. He looped the rawhide strand around the roan's pastern and saw the left leg jack-knife flat against the nervous, heaving belly. While Clint held taught, waiting for the shoe, another string of wild ones ran into the big keeper corral out back.

Clint showed a deep weariness to the young blacksmith whose heavy shoulders glistened in the day's rising heat. "Hurry along with that shoe, Jessie. I got chores yet to do."

The ugly work of riding them out, topping off the bad ones, fell to Clint. He was Spur Delta's top hand, first to fill the job since the Colonel's death. Clint thought about it now, sweating it out just a little. These wild Texas mustangs broke from the chute like a wagon on bed springs and gave you a hard ride all the way. It would not bother



him except for the new injury that had ached in his belly since early Spring.

Jessie flopped the red-hot iron and pumped the small hand bellows. His grey eyes settled heavily on Clint. "We're brothers, Clint. I reckon it's up to me to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Clint placed tired eyes on the husky lad.

"There's talk you won't be working, come fall. Your cautious methods won't satisfy Julie's new agent in town. There's a poke of other talk, Clint." The young man's jaw clamped shut.

Anger rose in Clint. "Now I'm getting a rodeo-minded crew, is that it?" He shook his head and blinked sweat from his burning, tired eyes. "Kyle Craven starts running a Sunday affair in town and, right off, my hands think there's a glamor in the horse business." Clint tightened his iron grip on the rawhide strand. "Go ahead, Jessie. What else they sayin'?"

"They say you're cullin' too heavy, sellin' buckin' horses at five dollars when they ought to bring ten times that in the East."

JESSIE doused the hot shoe in water and fitted it to the big roan's tender foot. Silently he hammered and clipped the nails, then, looked up abruptly.

"They say it's more than normal caution, Clint. They say it's you."

Clint frowned and dragged a chain of sweat off his chin with the one free hand. Then he stared up at the boy, knowing what he was thinking and not giving a damn because it was so far from the truth you couldn't find it with a telescope. He loosed the rawhide and the wild one kicked free. Then, studying the shod hoof a moment, he signaled Diego Rivas to come over from the snubbing post.

"Here's another one, Diego. Gentle as a friendly dog now that his feet don't hurt. Give me another like him and we'll start doin' chores."

The Mexican roustabout smiled. "Si, señor, one gentle horse coming up."

Jessie looked at Clint, his young eyes burning red. "That's it, Clint—that's what they're talking about. You take the gentle ones and cull the bad ones."

"Easy, son," Clint said, setting his jaw. "What you tryin' to prove?" Jessie blurted. "That you're just as big a coward as our old man?"

Clint whirled and for a moment felt the deep-seated pain rise like a lead weight in him. The boy had found a tenderness that even Clint didn't know was there. He had stepped down hard and it had hurt.

"You know that ain't so, Jessie. I'm runnin' this ranch the way Colonel Cantrell would want it run. He was my friend, Jessie."

Jessie's gaze was steady while he fumbled behind the stiff blacksmith apron for makin's and began rolling a smoke. "That the only reason you're here?"

"No, it ain't," Clint said flatly. "I'm thirty, past, and I'm all busted up inside. It's this job or contract bustin' all over the country at two bucks a head. That'd be for the rest of my life, Jessie. And I admit I couldn't stand that."

"I heard Pa give them same answers, Clint. 'I'm all shook up,' he'd say. 'Tell 'em I can't ride.' Then he'd start hittin' the bottle. I saw it, Clint, while you were away. He was yellow-scared at the last, and you're actin' just like him, givin' the same excuses."

Clint's hands shook a little then, but a patient smile spread across his dark tanned face. "You got it wrong, Jessie. All wrong."

He wanted to tell the boy what it was like to be shaken up inside. What it was like not knowing why the pain was there or when it would go away. Just feeling it, day and night. All the time figuring how you could go on doing the one thing you knew, the one thing you liked more than anything else.

"You got it all wrong," Clint repeated. "Especially about Pa. Pa was the bravest man I ever knew."

Jessie shrugged and, grasping the heavy tongs, he lifted an ember from the forge and lit the brown-paper smoke. "That's your excuse for dodgin' the bad ones."

Clint's anger lifted again. "And what's yours, Jessie? You don't get on a horse at all. How come?"

"I leave off ridin'," he said. "Cause I know where it leads. I had plenty opportunity to observe."

"Maybe a little too much observin'," Clint said. "I could put you on a horse that'd shake

your liver loose. You'd know then why Pa was old before his time. You'd know why I'm doin' things the way I do. The only way I can and come out on top."

CLINT moved away then, quietly ducking under the broad-limbed elder, heading out toward the keeper corral. He walked carefully, slanting into his steps, dragging the one injured leg that had been rolled on a dozen times. He was wearing dirtcrusted jeans and a sweat-stained shirt, turned grey with age. His skin, outside the shirt, was the color of copper. Inside, where the sun didn't reach, it was like a baby's skin. Drawing up, he took off his gloves and tucked them under the wide broncpeeler's belt that protected the stomach injury. He glanced back at Jessie.

How wrong the kid had really been, Clint didn't know. But there was no glory in this business, he knew. And it was not a fair test of a man's courage.

You topped off the bad ones when you had to, but mostly you stuck to broomtails. You worried about filling railroad cars on the siding in town, and you worried about your men, and you got paid ten dollars more a month for that. But one thing you didn't worry about any more—and that was the horses you rode. As top hand you could cull the outlaws and killers, not because you were scared, but because you'd had them before.

You knew they could put you on the shelf for months on end, and at thirty, past, you couldn't afford being out that long. There was just one job a bronc-peeler could shoot for when he began to slow down, and you had that job. A job you'd earned on a dozen killers and maybe half a thousand of the other kind. It was a good job and you were going to keep it.

Clint pulled his gaze around to Diego, working another horse, and tried to forget there'd been any talk. That kind usually ran it's course and died out anyway.

Along toward noon Kyle Craven led a sleek, iron-muscled claybank into the yard, which caused Clint's men to drop what they were doing and gather quietly at the snubbing post.

"Some hoss!" Shorty Blunt whistled.

Diego Rivas lifted over the rail. "You said it!" Then squinting, the Mexican lowered his voice. "Hey, boss, that's the outlaw we cut out last week."

The words hit Clint like a hammer, and he turned swiftly to gaze at the two men leading the animal behind the town hack. He saw it was Mott Stingly with Craven. Stingly who rode horses in Craven's big Sunday affair and was top money winner for the new circuit.

"What do you suppose they want?" Diego said.

"Whatever it is concerns Julie," Clint said. "Now let's get back to our chores."

He drifted over to the bronc chute, watching out of the corner of his vision as Julie Cantrell came down the walk to greet her city visitors.

Clint had run Spur Delta since Colonel Cantrell's death, and Julie had been more than satisfied with the results—until just recently, when she had hired Kyle Craven as her stock agent in town. Then she had started acting strangly toward Clint, and he'd been too busy to find out what, if anything, was troubling her.

HE WAS climbing the slats to start topping off the keepers when he saw Julie coming out to him, followed by Craven and Stingly.

Her young face was serious. "Is it true, Clint? Did we sell that horse to Kyle for only five dollars?"

Clint glanced out at Craven, handsomely dressed in dove-colored trousers and tailored frock coat. He was a big man, powerfully built. "That horse went in with our culls last week, Julie. He might have brought five, I don't remember."

Clint saw the men at the snubbing post drop their ropes and move to hear what was being said. Jessie came across from the blacksmith shop, and Clint saw the heavy questioning look on the boy's drawn face.

Julie's voice lifted. "Kyle says that, properly worked, this horse would bring a lot more, perhaps two hundred."

Clint looked down at Julie, noticing that she wore a white shirt, open at the neck, and the close fitting jeans that revealed her long slender legs, and he began to frown. At a horse outfit men got used to women dressing like men, because flying skirts spooked mustangs,

but Clint did not get used to it. He never would.

"I've got my reasons for culling that horse, Julie. I'm sure Craven's got his for bringing him back. I suspect there's some distance between."

Clint saw doubt register on Julie's face. She ran a quick hand through the dark flow of her hair and glanced down. "I don't quite understand, Clint."

Craven moved up beside Julie. "Just what is your reason, Guthrie? I got that horse shamefully cheap. What we're wondering is why you didn't work him out."

There was a little silence, and Julie glanced up quickly at Clint. "The way things are, we can always use a little extra."

"You never tame a horse like that one," Clint told her. "You maybe work him out, and maybe even sell him, but somewhere down the line somebody gets hurt, usually a woman or child. It's not worth it."

"You gotta take that chance," Craven said.

Clint felt sudden annoyance. "You run a bucking string, Craven. You put meanness into a horse. Out here, we try to take it out." Clint put his eyes on the claybank. "That one happens to be bad—so bad we couldn't take it out of him if we tried."

"But, Clint," Julie said, unable to keep suspicion out of her tone, "can you be sure?"

"A man's never completely sure about horses, Julie." He glanced at Craven. "They're like people—sometimes they fool you."

Mott Stingly moved up then and spoke from behind Cravens' shoulder. "You could ride him, Guthrie. That's one way to be sure. That's what a top hand's for, ain't it?"

Stiff silence was all around Clint, and for the first time he recognized where this was leading—where Craven wanted it to lead. Clint saw heavy doubt weighting the faces of his men. He saw the same doubt in Julie.

Suddenly, moved by clear intention, he set his jaw hard and spoke to Diego. "Get my gun from the bunkhouse." Then, looking hard at Craven, he said, "Move that stallion in just five minutes or I'll have to shoot him where he stands."

"No!" Julie said. She caught her breath.

"You can't run a legitimate horse outfit any other way," Clint said. "The bad ones have to be disposed of one way or another."

"But not this one," Julie said firmly.

"You set on keeping him?"

"We need the money," she said.

"Work him out, regardless. Is that it?"

"I think she's made that clear," Craven said.

"Is that it, Julie?" Clint repeated, ignoring Craven's jibe.

She nodded.

CLINT felt the deep drawing pain in his stomach, the one that had warned him never to take on a really rough ride again. He felt the pressuring gaze of his brother Jessie, and he thought of what it would be like in the future, making the circuit as a contract buster.

He could not believe that this had happened, but here it was right before him, the doubting faces, the wild one and the big question.

It had been put right up to him, and he was going to back down, not because he was scared, but because he had to.

"No thanks," he said softly. His hands wiped slowly against his dirt-crusted jeans, and the scraping sound seemed loud in the noon quiet. He looked at Julie just a moment. "I'll come by for my pay," he said. "Send Diego when it's ready."

He turned then, slowly, and his limping gate carried him across the hardpack to the bunkhouse.

Clint was packing his gear when Jessie came in and sat down. "You got to ride that horse," Jessie said pleadingly. "You got to now, Clint."

"A man don't have to do anything, Jessie. That's something you're bound to learn when you grow up. I don't have to stay here. I don't have to keep this job. And I don't have to ride a damn outlaw if I choose not to."

"You know what they're sayin'?" Jessie shouted.

"I don't give a damn."

"I heard the same thing from Pa," Jessie said. "I'm gettin' sick of it."

Clint grabbed the boy's arm viciously and drew him out of the chair. "You stop running down the old man, you hear? And stop looking

so hard for something you don't know anything about. Whenever you find what it is you're looking for, you're apt to also find you got no more and no less than the other fellow." He eased the pressure on the boy's arm then and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jessie. Maybe I'm as touchy about the old man as you are."

He paused a moment, then added, "Only I know what it was like for him. You don't. You never will."

He knew, Clint thought, because it was happening to him the same way. Clint had been going good this Spring, so good that he had grown overconfident. He began riding anything and everything, knowing it was wrong, but enjoying the friendly slap on the back and the exhilaration a tough ride gave him. Then one day it happened, too much horse, too much confidence.

"All that jarring has torn something loose," Doc Huntly had told him afterwards. "You better stay off broncs for a while. Get lot's of rest."

Clint had laughed. "But I can't stay off 'em, Doc. We're coming into our busy season. I got to make that place go."

"All right then, stay off the bad ones," Doc had said. "But if you get shaken up again, send for me at once. Otherwise I'll put you in the hospital where I'll know you're getting proper care."

No one knew about that visit to the doctor. No one would. Clint had sworn Doc Huntly to secrecy. Suddenly Jessie's chair scraped wood and, rising to go, he said, "You're scared, Clint. Yellow scared."

Clint felt the words like a plank across his back, but calmly he closed the warbag and fastened the buckles. "Jessie, I got a horse at the rack outside and my bag's packed. The minute I draw my pay, I'm on my way. Nothing you can say now will change my mind."

He put out his hand. Jessie stared down at it. Then turned and stalked out. Slowly Clint sat back on his bunk to wait.

TOWARD evening, when the sun had touched the rim of the Western prairie and the shadows sent a cooler breath of air through the bunkhouse, Clint saw Diego hurrying across the hardpack toward him.

"Miss Julie wants to see you now," the Mexican said.

"Thanks," Clint said shouldering the heavy warbag.

"Something else, boss," Diego's voice grew severe. "Señor Jessie is going to ride this horse."

"Jessie? Why Jessie?" Clint frowned and put his warbag on the floor.

"He's drinking. The boy's kid him a lot. One theeng, he's got courage."

Clint's gaze snapped, touched the Mexican like a whip, then settled quickly. "Bottle courage, Diego. That's all, and it's not enough."

"I theenk, myself, he will be sorry. But he hopes to prove something."

Clint turned and began pacing the floor. The stomach pain knifed at his insides, reminding him of his own unfitness. Stopping suddenly, he reached the warbag and brought forth the bronc belt and held it, looking down.

"With the tricks you know, you can handle this horse," Diego said.

"No!" Clint said. "Hell, no!" He tossed the belt back and thought then of telling Diego that in his condition even he could not handle this one. He rose and put out his hand to the Mexican. "Ride pickup for him, Diego. He don't have to stick up there, just so he finds out what it's like."

The Mexican smiled sadly and, shaking Clint's hand, he edged out the door. "Si, amigo. I'll do what I can."

At the main house Julie's eyes avoided Clint's and, looking down, she counted his pay a second time. "I'm willing to admit I was wrong, Clint," she said.

"Maybe you weren't wrong, Julie. Maybe you were right. But we can't forget it. It would always be there."

A sudden desperation seemed to grip her. She stood close to Clint, and her tone was almost pleading. "I'll be lost without you."

"That goes double," Clint said. "But I reckon it's something that can't be helped." He took his pay then and, ducking through the door, he crossed the yard to his mount. He seated his hat and purposely put Julie and the kid out of his mind as he swung into the saddle. Across the way he could hear Diego's shrill voice at the snubbing post, and he could

tell that things were going badly, that the big horse was not holding still for the saddle.

Something in the high squeal of this one made little goose bumps pop out all over Clint. From long habit he felt concern and, rolling out of the saddle, he walked over to the buck-chute just as the big claybank was brought in, squealing and kicking.

Jessie stood high above the slatted sides, his legs apart, waiting to drop onto the crazed animal. But for the moment he turned fear-glazed eyes onto the thick, knotting withers, and Clint saw that there was something near panic in the boy's mind.

He saw, too, that Jessie's drinking had brought a dull puzzlement to this whole affair. The boy trembled and hesitated, and suddenly Clint knew that this was wrong for him. Jessie was at the heels of backing down, close to bolting the chute, and once he committed himself to that action, it would be doubly hard to turn back.

PAINFULLY Clint remembered his own hope, the hope that he would never have to board another one of these. But he saw now that he had been foolish to think that. Always when you thought you had boarded your last outlaw, there was still one more. And there would always be one more.

A man boarded an outlaw of one kind or another every day of his life, and rightfully, Clint decided, this one, this day, was his, not Jessie's.

Clint started climbing then, up the slatted sides of the bucking chute and came face to face with Jessie. The boy opened his mouth to speak and Clint hit him. Not hard, a glancing blow that tumbled him clear of the chute. Clint saw the whisky-dazed eyes blinking, and then Jessie was kneeling on the ground, being sick.

"Ride him, boss!" Diego shouted and, climbing onto a pickup mount, he showed Clint a clenched fist.

Sweat broke then and trickled down Clint's arm. His palms grew wet, and quietness settled around him. His eyes took in the tableau of long-shadowed figures drawn to the corral now, and he dared not think that he was playing the fool.

Clint looked around for Julie and saw her standing a little way off, looking tense. Their eyes met, and then reluctantly Clint's attention dropped to the thousand pounds of death and destruction beneath him. There was no more time to think. Not of the still driving pain in him or of what this jolting ride would do to him.

Only time now to think of the horse. Clint eased gently into the saddle and, feeling the sudden striating muscles, he signaled Shorty to kick open the chute.

The horse lifted as though shot from a catapult. Clint was suddenly skyborn, and for what seemed a long time there was no sound. Only the gentle lifting of his body. Then, like the breathless moment before a clap of thunder, Clint set his jaw and the pounding came, the jarring stiff-legged fall which spread chilling white particals before his eyes. The animal hit four-square and was stopped like blunt-nosed ironwood hitting bedrock.

Clint jack-knifed and his chin cracked hard against the horse's withers. Then, suddenly, he was snapped back like a willow branch. His spine popped and shuddering pain racked him from head to toe.

He would not last on this one, Clint thought, and glanced anxiously around for Diego, riding pickup. Once in five hundred times you met an animal like this one. Once in a lifetime, maybe, you came up against a real man-killer like this.

Clint felt it now, like a continuous shock, through the animals driving muscles. He saw it in the booming head, that swung like a pendelum, back and forth, to eye the human cargo up there. Eyes that were red and crazy with fear. Jaws set wide apart, showing yellow teeth and giving forth with that low, grating bellow.

Clint felt the pressure steadily mounting against him, and then the animal was sunfishing, switching ends, biting at him from either side. Clint set his weight quickly and expertly to counterbalance the animal's frenzied efforts, and he was thinking that he might sit this beast, after all. But then, pulling harder and harder, he felt something snap inside. Pain shot through his arms and legs. And the horse, sensing an edge gained, threw his full weight into a corner post, and before Clint could recover he was going overboard.

A BLACK hole opened and, with his arms spread wide, Clint was reaching to touch bottom. When he hit, warm tasting blood began to back up in his throat. Diego came in fast, blinding the claybank with the jacket he was wearing, hazing the crazed beast away, then catching him and taking him off to stand quietly, with every tight muscle quivering, at the bucking chute.

Clint lifted to one knee, but his legs wobbled and he sank back on the ground. A gray fog descended around him, and it was Jessie who reached him first and dragged him out of the arena.

Then Jessie was ducking back through the poles. Clint saw him walk boldly out to the claybank and climb aboard. The driving pain was a living thing in Clint then, but it didn't matter. He smiled thinly. Jessie would ride the horse now, he would not turn back if it killed him—which it well might do.

Diego lifted the hood and the claybank started his stiff-legged pitching. Clint saw Jessie grab the reins and rake the animal from shoulder to flank with sharp-rowled spurs, and then a slow rising hood of darkness closed around Clint.

There came later the quick flutter of yellow light, and Clint saw Julie lighting a lamp near the bed where he lay in the main house. The pain was only slight now.

"Well, it's understood," he heard Doc Huntly saying. "He's to stay in bed until I say he can get up. Maybe take a month, but he'll be all right. Should have done this in the first place."

"How'd Jessie make out?" Clint said, rising on one elbow.

"Broke a leg, fractured a collarbone," Huntly said, and laughed. "Bruises I couldn't count on both hands." His manner grew stern. "That was a real bad horse. Should have been shot. Craven knew that. Two of his men got laid up last week just trying to saddle him."

"Thank goodness I found out about Craven," Julie said. She looked at Clint. "I've been checking the brand ledger. He's been cheating wherever he could. Guess he figured on discrediting you, so he could take charge and make an even bigger haul. He had Mott Stingly in mind for top hand." She glanced back at Doc Huntly. "I've told Craven to clear out or be sued."

"He'll clear out," Huntly said. "Too many folks in town figured him out, too. Well, goodbye, and no heroics this time, Clint. You got to have complete rest."

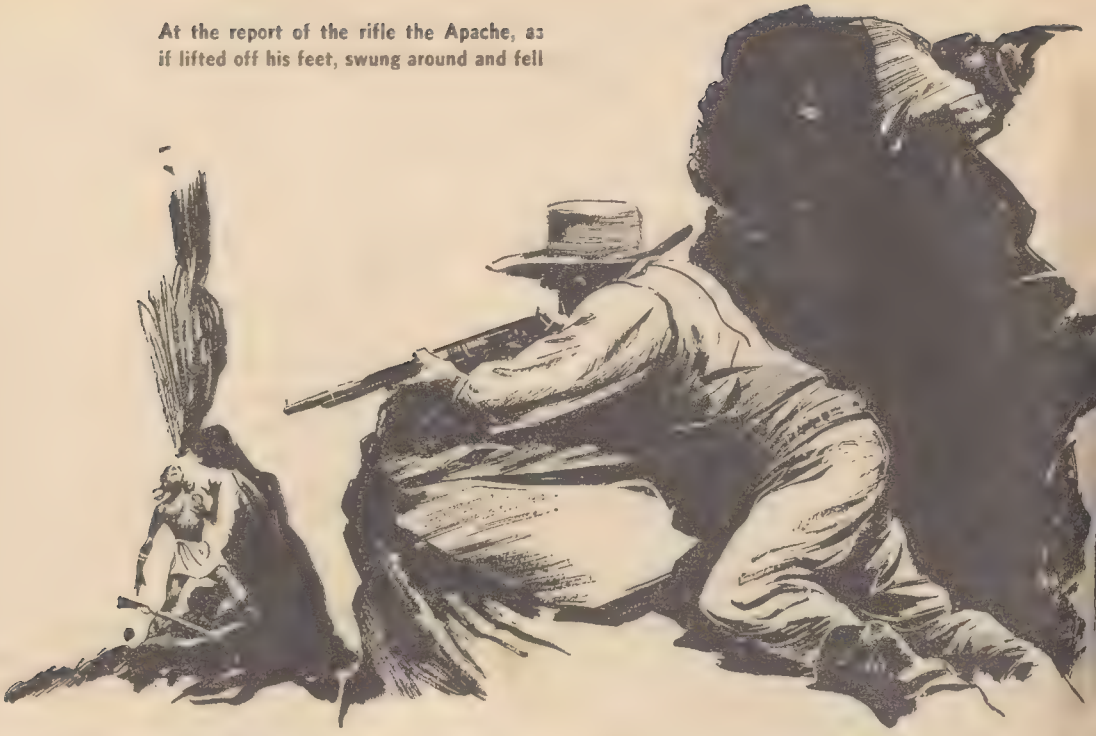
"I'll see to that, Doc Huntly," Julie said. She smiled, and her eyes showed that she meant it.

Clint eased back on his pillow and stared at the ceiling. There was a new outlaw in his life. But this one he wouldn't mind so much. This one wore a dress and was pretty to look at.

"You have to do what I say for thirty days," Julie said, sitting down beside him.

"I will," Clint promised.

"Then put your arms around me and tell me you'll never try to leave Spur Delta again."



At the report of the rifle the Apache, as if lifted off his feet, swung around and fell

Harry Keene lived for but one thing—to avenge the slaying of his wife

A MAN'S LAND

HARRY KEENE lay against the scorching heat of the rock beneath him, seeing the thin trail of dust rising against the flat summer sky. He was, suddenly and with that unknown sense that had allowed him to live this long on the desert, conscious of another human presence. Below him and to the right, he caught the quick movement of a brown form; a half-naked Apache came to his full, squatted height, stared for one full minute in the direction of the rising dust, and then quickly disappeared into the maze of rocks and scrub trees that were the beginnings of the foothills.

He sucked at his tongue, the want of water powerful within him, but he resisted the urge. He thought of pursuing the Apache, and then dismissed the thought, realizing his own limitations. He had been on the desert for seven weeks now, always searching, never quite finding. Perhaps this time....

And then he saw the single Apache moving through a dry wash below him, clearly in view. Three other Apaches popped into sight, seemingly materializing out of the earth. He felt his body tense with the want of the kill as he recognized one of them.

He whispered the name, "Manuelo," and felt the hate within him.

Manuelo stood just below him, not 200 yards

BY JAMES P. DUFF

away, tall for an Apache, almost as tall as a white man, with that curiously overly large head and the long, gangling arms that reached below his knees, listening to the words and gestures of the Apache who had been on the hill.

Keene damned himself for having left his rifle behind with his horse. What he had searched for all these weeks, what he lived for, was down there below him, within easy rifle distance.

The four Apaches turned, trotting off on foot, disappearing from his sight.

He lay there in the intense heat, trying to think ahead, trying to anticipate. He lifted his eyes, staring once more across the shimmering distance. He could see beneath the dust screen now, could see the eight wagons poking along across the desert. And he also saw something else, something he was sure the Apache he had seen before, had seen also: there were no flanking guards out, and only a single rider rode perhaps a hundred yards ahead of the wagons. Keene smiled to himself.

He crawled on hands and knees back to where his horse was waiting between two huge boulders. He took down his canteen, poured water over one hand, and let the horse lick at that hand; after that, he took one swallow of water for himself, emptying the canteen.

He was a big man, broad and heavy, but with a looseness now of having lived off the sparse land for too long. A black beard covered his face; his eyes, heavy-lidded from years on the desert, were full of hate, intense, dominating hate. He took his time checking his rifle and hand gun, his movements unhurried but sure, and then moved into the saddle and let the horse pick its own way down the hillside and out on to the flatland of the desert proper.

He was still smiling. He knew what Manuelo was going to do. He knew what he, Keene, was going to do. It wouldn't be too long, two more days at the most. The many weeks had been worth it.

He still didn't hurry. He let the horse walk, occasionally breaking into a jog, and then resuming the walk. He knew exactly where he would meet the wagon train, and he was angling in that direction.

He caught the flash of a mirror against the bright sun on his right, and knew that his prior assumption had been correct. Manuelo was summoning his band. No, it wouldn't be too long, and he thought he knew where it would happen. Dead Man's Pass. He considered that he knew Manuelo pretty well by now.

AS HE approached the wagons in that shaded gray light between day and night, he saw two more things that confirmed his earlier thought: the eight wagons were staggered too far apart in a loose circle, and there were no guards posted.

Two small boys darted out from between the wagons, sighted him, and let out shrill yells. The commotion began inside the circle immediately. He walked his horse the last fifty yards, up the slight rise, the sight of the two boys momentarily disturbing him, noting the excitement he was causing.

A tall, heavy-bodied man, a rifle in the crook of his right arm, came to stand in one of the openings. Keene recognized him, and with the recognition came a jarring thought: Dutch Charlie was a veteran of the desert. Why, then, the carelessness of the wagon train?

The big man, Dutch Charlie, waved a hand in greeting and said: "Harry Keene. Thought you was dead by now."

He stopped, not entering the circle. "Not dead yet," he said.

"You been mighty lucky then," said Dutch Charlie.

Keene smiled at this, looking past the big man into the circle. What he saw there surprised him, surprised and, again, disturbed him. A fat, red-faced woman stood with an old muzzle-loader resting on the rim of a wagon, the gun pointed in his direction; behind her were grouped another half-dozen women, children scampering in and out among them. He saw only one other man, standing near one of the wagons, his face not visible in the shadows.

He said, "I sighted you from the foothills back there, Charlie. No flank guards out?"

"Ain't got none to send out," replied Dutch Charlie. He scratched at his cheek. "Did you sight anything else?"

Keene hesitated, looking once more at the women and children. They had no right to be

in this land; it was not a land for them. "No," he said.

"Light and eat," Dutch Charlie said, swinging back to join the women within the circle.

Keene stepped down, and began removing the saddle from his horse. One of the women from the group came towards him, a small boy at her side. She was, he guessed, a couple of years younger than his own age, which was thirty, tall, rather plain-looking, and with a smell of scrubbed soap about her.

He placed the saddle beneath the nearest wagon, picked up his rifle, and led the horse around to the rest of the stock, grouped at the south end of the wagons. The woman and the boy, he noticed, had followed him. He spent some time rubbing down the horse, conscious of the curious stares coming from the woman and the boy.

Finished with that, he picked up his rifle again, and started to move inside the circle.

"Do you always carry that?" the woman asked.

He stopped near her, staring at her. It had been a long time since he had looked at a woman, any woman, and this one, strangely, reminded him of Mary. The thought of Mary, as it always did, brought a strange twist to his insides.

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Keene."

"It's a good idea," he said, and wished, again, that he had had that much sense earlier in the day.

The boy, bright-eyed and tousle-haired, looked up at Keene, one forefinger digging at his nose.

"Don't do that, Bobby!" the woman said. She smiled away the harshness of her tone, showing her to be more attractive than Keene originally had imagined. "I'm sorry. It seems almost everything is forbidden now." Her steady gaze held Keene's face. "I know you, Mr. Keene, I've heard of you much since we've been in this country. I'm Allison MacLeod."

"That's a funny name," he said, and walked past her, into the circle. He wanted nothing to do with them; he wanted nothing to do with any of them. He wished that she hadn't even told him her name. He would forget it right away—and forget her smile.

IT WAS full dark now. He squatted next to Dutch Charlie and the other man, accepting the plate of food handed him by the former.

"This here's Miles Johnson, Keene," Dutch Charlie said. "He owns this outfit."

Keene took his time eating, studying Johnson, wondering what kind of a man would bring women and children into this land without adequate protection. Johnson was slightly built, with a long, sad face, and wearing clothes that did not belong on the desert.

"I've heard much about you, Mr. Keene," Johnson said. "I'd appreciate it if you would continue on with us."

"That depends," Keene said, "on where you're going, and why you're out here with these women and kids without protection."

Johnson, nodding his head, rose to his feet. "That can be explained, Mr. Keene," he said. "It was not of my choosing. I'm not that green. We have eight women and twelve children with us, and Charlie and I are the only men. These are the families of some of the men who work at my company's mine at Big Mound. We left Toolesburg eleven days ago with a troop of cavalry as escort. Three days ago, the cavalry was called back. True, the captain in charge was reluctant to leave us, but he had his orders, and he had to obey them." He waved a hand in the air. "We were almost half-way to Big Mound It made little difference which way we went, so we decided to continue on. The cavalry, I should say, has promised to rejoin us as soon as possible." Keene knew, then, what he would do. He had guessed correctly so far, and this brought a gladness within him, a gladness he hadn't felt in months. The wagon train, to reach Big Mound, would have to go through Dead Man's Pass. He had guessed this much; now, he only hoped Manuelo would follow the scheme.

Harry Keene scrubbed the plate in the sand, then rose to his feet. "I'm going that way, Mr. Johnson," he said. "I'll ride along."

He started to move away, and then heard Dutch Charlie's question, "Did you get done what you started out to do, Harry?"

He turned back. The big man's face was a shadowed mask in the darkness. He moved away, not answering. . . .

A baby squawled its neglect, piercing the still night air. Keene sat cross-legged, listening to the breathing of the woman behind him, smelling her smell. She had been there for some time, watching him in the dark, and he wondered why.

"It's late, Mrs. MacLeod," he said, without turning. "You should be sleeping."

She came up to sit down beside him. The moon peeked through the high clouds for one brief moment, revealing the sharpness of her profile to him. Again, he was struck by her resemblance to Mary.

She said, "You're a lonely man, Mr. Keene, a lonely man and one filled with hate."

There was no answer from him; what she had said was true.

"I know your story," she said, "And I'm sorry for you. Your wife must have meant a great deal to you. I—I lost my husband, two years ago, to the Comanches." She waited for him to say something and, when he didn't, she went on. "Dutch Charlie says you've been searching for the Apache who killed your wife for months. When you find him and kill him, then what, Mr. Keene?"

"This is a man's land, Mrs. MacLeod. A woman without a man has no right to be here," Keene said sharply.

"Perhaps," she said. "Perhaps, Mr. Keene, I'm here looking for a man. The loneliness can become too much."

She stood up. He started to turn, to look at her, then held back the impulse. She waited a moment, then moved off in the darkness. He listened to the rustle of her skirts, and again thought of Mary. Life was not as simple for him as it was for her, but he had to finish what he started. That much was completely clear to him.

DAWN was still chilled with the night air. Keene breakfasted with Dutch Charlie and Johnson, and noticed the woman, Allison MacLeod, watching him intently. It was Dutch Charlie's opinion—and Keene agreed with this—that they would reach Dead Man's Pass by noon of the next day.

He felt the anticipation mounting within him. He made no effort to talk with either of the men, and went out of his way to avoid the women and children, especially Allison MacLeod. He had made up his mind; nothing could change that. Manuelo deserved to die. *He had to die.* If these people got caught up in the middle, it was their own fault; they shouldn't have been there anyway. It was a man's land.

He told Dutch Charlie he would ride point during the day, knowing that he was avoiding an issue, wanting to stay clear of any entanglements within the wagon train. As he was saddling up, Allison MacLeod approached, followed by the boy, Boddy, leading a saddled horse.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Keene," she said, "but Bobby would like to ride with you today."

He swung around, looking down at the boy, who wore a wide-brimmed hat much too big for him. Keene noted, also, the rifle in the boy's saddle scabbard.

"None of my business, ma'am," he said, "but it'd seem the boy would be safer in here."

"I know your reputation, Mr. Keene. I turst you with Bobby. Besides, if an attack does come—" She looked around the circle, shrugging her shoulders, leaving it unfinished.

He didn't reply. He moved out of the circle, not looking again at the boy, letting him follow at his own pace. The boy was not his responsibility; none of them were.

The sun climbed, and with it, the beginnings of the day's heat. The boy dogged along behind him, not trying to strike up a conversation. For that, Keene was thankful. They kept a mile ahead of the wagon train, two unsmiling, unspeaking little specks in the vastness of the desert and the heat.

Some three hours later, Keene sighted the first gray, corrugated ridges that were the beginnings of the mountains. Beyond, he could see the shaded blue mountains themselves, and, again, the anticipation of the kill came to him.

He reined in, dismounted, and watched the boy mimic his movements. The boy's burned skin was peeling along the flats of his cheeks, across his stubby little nose. His own throat, long used to the desert, was parched for water, and he knew the boy must be suffering a great deal.

"Time for a drink, boy," he said.

The boy's smile came quickly, but he

waited, holding his canteen, carefully watching Keene. The man rubbed water across his horse's nose before drinking himself; the boy again mimicked him, and Keene smiled to himself, pleased.

They squatted on their heels in the slight shade of their horses. Keene, pointing at the boy's rifle, and asked, "Do you know how to use that, boy?"

"I guess so," the boy replied.

"You either do or you don't."

"I do."

They spoke no more that day. In the late afternoon, just before sunset, the two of them reached the beginning ridges. Beyond, Keene could see the high buttes and towering Big John Mountain that overlooked Dead Man's Pass. Greenness was there, greenness and water and cool shade and, thought Keene, Maneulo.

Looking back to scan the distance between them and the wagon train, Keene caught a flash of sun against metal high on the ridge to his right. Manuelo was up there, watching them, waiting for them to come on, waiting for them to enter Dead Man's Pass.

Keene and the boy turned back, heading for the wagon train and the night's camp. As they came near, he saw Allison MacLeod standing in the open, a hand raised to shield her eyes from the setting sun.

As he rode past her, Keene said, "He's a good boy, ma'am," and continued on, leaving them to follow.

CLOUDS stretched out vividly across the horizon, allowing the brilliance of the bright moon to light up the camp. Keene sat with his back resting against the spokes of a wagon wheel, watching the women and children prepare for the night. A woman sat directly across from him, her young baby wrapped in a drab-colored shawl, her voice low and quieting across the distance. The fat, red-faced woman who had held the muzzle-loader on him, stamped by, dragging an unwilling boy by the scuff of the neck. A woman sat in the rear of a wagon, staring across at him, brushing her long golden hair.

Bobby came up to him. "Good night, Mr. Keene," he said.

"Good night, boy," he murmured.

"You could call me Bobby," the boy said. "That's my name, you know." He turned, walking in the direction of his wagon.

Keene thought of the family he and Mary had planned. A boy like that would have made him proud, very proud. He was a good boy, silent and straight, with a hint of devilment in the way he looked at you, and he would make a good man. *If he lived that long.* He put that thought aside. He knew that he, himself, probably would die the next day, but that mattered little; he had nothing left to live for. The important thing, the most important thing of all, was that Manuelo should die. That was above everything else.

He got up and, picking up his saddle and gear, moved back in the direction of the stock. Dutch Charlie stepped out from between two of the wagons.

"Going someplace?" he asked.

Keene hesitated. "I'll ride ahead some."

"If it's gonna come, it'll come tomorrow at Dead Man's Pass."

Keene didn't say anything to that.

"You didn't see nothin' today?"

"No," he replied. "Nothing, Charlie."

"Funny," the big man said.

Keene stared at him. Dutch Charlie was no one's fool. Could he possibly know? Even if he did, what difference did it make?

A thought occurred to him. "Charlie, when's the army coming back?"

"I don't know," Dutch Charlie said. "Wish I did. I got that feelin', that damned, ornery feelin' in the back of my head." His hand came out, brushing against Keene in the darkness. "Harry, you got a lot of hate in you, and maybe I don't blame you none. But don't do nothin' foolish."

He moved away, not saying anything more. He was in the saddle, walking the horse away from the circle, when the voice of Allison MacLeod reached him. "Good night, Mr. Keene."

He didn't answer. . . .

The mid-morning sun found him high on the south side of Dead Man's Pass, lying in a tree-shrouded gully with a commanding view of the surrounding country. The pass itself was in the shape of a saddle set sideways, with the south, or horn, side rising into two high, brown-topped plateaus on either side of

Big John Mountain, the highest of the Midnight range; the north side, forming a lip for the smaller mountains stretching beyond, cut back to hang over the pass proper.

He had, he thought, in taking up his present position, guessed correctly again. He had seen eleven mounted Apaches, Manuelo unmistakably at their head, come in from the west, and then split up. Manuelo and seven others had disappeared into the crevices and gullies on the north side, some 150 yards directly across from him; the other three had come to his side, spreading out below him, out of his sight. He was in a good position, would be able to fire across and down at those opposite him, and still be protected from the sight of those below.

Lying there in the safe seclusion, he pictured the scene. In another two hours at the most, Dutch Charlie would appear at the east entrance to the pass, moving along cautiously, looking for some sign of either him or the Apaches, finding neither. The wagon train would follow, and, as it neared the middle of the pass, the Apaches would volley their shots, and then charge. The women and children would be helpless, caught up in the slaughter.

Keene sighed. He would have to wait for the charge. Manuelo would be leaping from his hidden position, leading the charge. Keene would need only one shot. Mary would be atoned for; Manuelo would be dead.

HE WHILED away the time by trying to pick out the positions of the Apaches; in an hour, he had six of them located, but wasn't sure which was Manuelo, if any.

The picture of the women and children kept returning to his mind; he couldn't block it out. He told himself that they had no business in this land. He tried to balance his killing of Manuelo against the deaths of the women and children. He thought of the boy, Bobby, straight and proud, looking ahead to his life as a man, and he thought of the boy's mother, a woman lonesome in a man's land, searching for a man to rid her of that loneliness.

He knew, suddenly, what he had to do. He felt, within himself, that it would be a wasted gesture, but one he had to make. He had to give them some time to form a defense, no matter how weak, to at least make a show of resistance.

He picked out the head of an Apache crouched in a crevice across from him, sighted carefully, and pulled the trigger. The report of the rifle echoed and re-ehcoed throughout the pass. The Apache swung around as if lifted off his feet, falling out of sight. Keene fired three more rapid shots across the distance, heard the high, shrill scream as one of them hit its mark, and then quickly ran back up the gully to where his horse was.

He knew the sound would carry to the wagon train, and he knew Dutch Charlie would quickly form them into a circle. He had, now, to get back to them, to help them back there.

An Apache loomed suddenly twenty feet in front of him, rifle aimed at him. Keene fell away to the right, hearing the explosion of the Apache's rifle as he did so, drawing his own hand gun. He felt the impact of a bullet tearing at his left shoulder and saw the Apache stagger backwards, then pivot and fall on his face.

Keene ran quickly to his horse, the quick-flowing blood from the wound in his shoulder withdrawing his strength at each agonizing step. He heard more shooting behind him; bullets whined above his head, thudding into neary-by trees. He ran the horse through the short timber, heading south, and then cut to the east, heading down a wide wash towards the floor of the desert.

He stopped suddenly, almost losing his seat, as a wave of mounted Apaches swept by in front of him, half-hidden by a cloud of dust. He watched as they spread out in a loose line, rifles waving in the air, preparing to encircle the wagon train. Keene knew there were two more, somewhere behind him, on his side of the pass, but he had to take the chance. He bolted his horse into the open, a single man chasing the line of charging Apaches before him.

He heard the shots from behind him, half saw the little gushers of dust rising around him, but he kept going, zigging and zagging his horse now, making as difficult a target as possible.

The blood pounded in his head. His wound was flowing freely, ebbing his strength. And

then, suddenly, all hell seemed to break loose. As he swayed in the saddle, he was conscious of a concentrated volley coming from within the wagon train, saw four, five Apaches jolted from the backs of their hoses, almost as if some unseen thing had picked them up and then thown them down again.

He saw this, and then saw nothing more. He swayed one last time in the saddle, and then felt himself falling into space.

THE sun was bitterly bright against his now opening eyes. Dutch Charlie sat on the ground next to him, his big face creased in a happy smile. Behind him, stood Allison MacLeod, her eyes seeking Keene's, the smile coming quickly to change the somberness of her face. He sat up, the hurt in his shoulder severe, and looked around him. Blue-coated army men were in evidence everywhere. A tall captain was talking to Miles Johnson. Nearby sat an army corporal, his white-bandaged head showing starkly.

Dutch Charlie said, "The army boys joined us during the night. We slaughtered 'em, Harry, damned if we didn't."

He felt at the tight, neat bandage at his shoulder. The wound throbbed unceasingly. He was, suddenly, angered with himself; his gesture had been wasted, but wasted in a different manner than he had thought. And then the anger subsided. He was not a man to brood long.

He rose to his feet, weaving slightly with the dizziness. The woman put out an arm, but he didn't take it. Dutch Charlie, also rising, nodded at him, and he followed the big man across a short space of ground.

A twisted, half-naked, brown form lay in the dust, its face buried from view. He stood there, looking down at it, and then placed a toe against the form's shoulder, turning it over on its back. The face showed nothing more than death, the awful death of the desert. Manuelo would ride no more, kill no more.

"Guess it don't make no difference who killed him," said Dutch Charlie.

Keene stood there, looking down at the dead Manuelo, a tall and lonely man in the bright sun. The woman came up beside him, touching his arm.

"Now what, Mr. Keene?" she asked.

He turned, looking at her.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. 1958 is the centennial of the birth of President Theodore Roosevelt who, as a colonel, held the first reunion of his famous Rough Riders in 1899 at Las Vegas, in what Territory, now a state?

2. The famous Shoshone Trail forms a long U-shaped loop in the mountainous Shoshone National Forest, in what state?

3. Where was the famous "Battle at the O.K. Corral" fought: Tombstone, Arizona; Lincoln, New Mexico; or Dodge City, Kansas?

4. Lake Pend Oreille in Idaho is noted for a phenomenally large freshwater fish called "the Kamloops." What species?

5. There is a Silver City, New Mexico and a Silver City, Idaho. One is the site of a fairly well-known college, the other a ghost town. Which is which?

6. Is the fruit of all kinds of cactus edible?

7. See if you can locate these once-wild frontier towns by states: Deadwood, Cripple Creek, Dodge City, Tonopah, Langtry (once called Vinegarroon.)

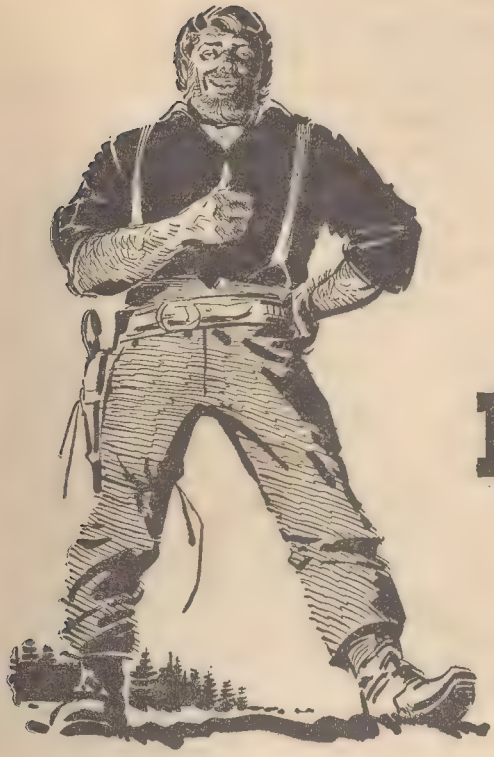
8. In the old West, if a man was to be "learning to braid hair bridles," what did it usually mean?

9. What is another word for a sound made by horses—besides whinny, squeal, snort, or scream?

10. What is a piñon (peen-YONE)?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 91. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.



END OF THE LEGEND

A True Story By
T. J. KERTTULA AND
D. L. McDONALD

I'M A SALT River roarer, I'm full of fight, and I sure do love the women!"

From New Orleans to St. Louis, in the early 1800's, that bull-throated bellow in the streets could mean only one thing Mike Fink was in town. And to the law-abiding element it was like an icy wind blowing down their spines, for either from hearsay or experience most of them didn't need a second guess to know what would happen when Mike and the keelboatmen hit town.

The only practical way devised to handle the rivermen was to get them drunk as quickly as possible, even if it took a barrel of liquor. To let Mike and his crew go on a leisurely jag was just too expensive in terms of battered citizens and broken bar fixtures. As for the law, as often as not the roistering crews locked local officers in their own jails and threw away the keys before they started to take over a town.

Mike Fink may share our folklore with the gigantic Paul Bunyan—but there's this one important difference. The legendary logger and his blue ox, Babe, grew up piecemeal from yarns spun around a hundred hot stoves in the timber country, but Mike Fink was real.

Since he didn't suffer from false modesty, Mike may have stretched the truth a little in the first-hand accounts of his exploits that have come down to us. It's likely, too, that Davy Crockett didn't hew right to the line in his account of his trip upriver with Mike Fink. All of which is just too bad, for the few facts we know about this hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-loving king of the rivermen are a lot more exciting than the yarns he and Davy dreamed up. Ironically, the best-authenticated thing we know about Mike Fink was at the last, when he'd outlived his legend.

HISTORICALLY, we know that Mike was born in Fort Pitt, later Pittsburg, in 1770 of Irish-American stock. Of his childhood nothing is known save Mike's own claim that at the tender age of one month he weaned himself from his mother's milk and thereafter thrived on a formula made of "half

whisky and half good river water." It was a formula he never outgrew. To the end, he could consume a gallon of whisky in any twenty-four hour period and finish on his feet. Nor did he hold with the effete custom of straining river water or "settlin' it" with a sprinkling of cornmeal.

"A little sand," he maintained, "scours out the bowels, and the more dirt you git in your drinkin' water the healthier you'll be."

Whatever the merits of the theory, it suited Mike. By the time he was in his mid-teens he was serving as Indian scout. A little later he took to the barges, and by the time he was twenty-five he was running his own keelboat on the Ohio and the Mississippi.

Before the steamboat was invented it took a special breed of man—"half-alligator and half-horse," Mike claimed—to be a boatman on these rivers. The shortest keelboat run on record from New Orleans to Cincinnati was seventy-eight days, and it was killing labor all the way. To push the heavy-loaded barges up past Horsetail Ripple, past Lytart's Falls, past half a hundred other dangers with no power save brute strength, a thousand-foot towline and "settin' poles" a man must need be pure guts and ten feet tall. In their distinctive garb of red flannel shirt and sagging buckskin pants the clannish keelboatmen were top dogs in the rough hierarchy of the frontier—and Mike Fink was top dog of them all. It was his boast that he could "outrun, outjump, outcuss, outdrink, outfight and outlove any man on both sides of the river," and there were plenty of men and gals—especially in the pleasure ports of New Orleans, Shawneetown and Natchez-under-the-Hill—who'd agree with him on every score.

Mike wasn't just talking when he said he loved the women. Unlike the gigantic Paul Bunyan, Mike was "a kinda average-lookin' sort of feller," according to a contemporary writer. He was round-faced, gray-eyed, about five-foot-nine and around 180 pounds, but he was lusty as a rutting boar. And in an era when women were labeled either good or bad, and men behaved accordingly, Mike made no differentiation. Good or bad, he loved 'em.

He usually kept a woman aboard on every trip. It didn't matter much to him if she was dark or light, a round-eyed farmer's daughter or a tired little number from one of the houses under the Hill—just so she was a woman. For the duration of the trip Mike appointed her as his official "wife."

These wives-pro-tem couldn't have had an easy time of it, for in addition to being quick-tempered, possessive and amoral, Mike had a sardonic sense of humor. Too, as perhaps the finest rifle shot this country has evern known, he didn't care to let himself get out of practice and he kept his hand in on the long voyages by shooting coffee cups off their heads or shattering plates held in their fingers.

Once, when he had forced the lady of the moment to bury herself neck-deep in dry oak leaves so he could do a little target practice without being thrown off by her flinching, he changed his mind suddenly and set fire to the leaves instead. As she departed squalling for the river Mike remarked, "Peg jest don't hold her head still, nohow. And mebbe this'll learn her not to go smilin' at the bargemen we passes."

Another time, hailed into court for shooting the heel off a colored boy, Mike explained, "That poor little darky was ahankerin' to wear tight-fittin' gentleman's boots, and I was jest shapin' his feet up for it."

FOR nearly a quarter-century Mike rode the crest, hated, admired, emulated, and becoming each year more and more of a living legend. In fact, in this period the legend has almost obliterated the real Mike Fink and it is only at the last that he comes again in focus.

By 1820 Mike was fifty years old and his way of life was nearly finished. The steamboat, the turnpike and the railroad took over the nation's transportation and the keelboat days were over. For a year or two longer Mike's hoarse shout could still be heard in the streets, but each time farther west. By early fall of 1822 he'd drifted clear to the upper reaches of the Big Muddy, and he turned up in the employ of General Ashley the newly-established trading post at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri. Bitter and down on his luck, Mike became a laborer at the fort.

From the start, he caused trouble. The only substitute he could find for the exercise

and excitement of his keelboating days was to work over the personnel of the fort and the few trappers who operated from it. He was still considerable of a man, and it was possible on any given day to gauge the state of Mike's disposition by counting the number of battered men in sight.

Much of his bad temper stemmed from his lack of liquor. He'd been used to drinking prodigious amounts of it for half a century, and here at the fort it was strictly rationed. Mike vocally and physically objected to this restraint upon his freedom. In vain the storekeeper tried to explain that a profitable trade along the Yellowstone depended on keeping the Indians drunk, and if Mike had his fill there'd be no "tradin' whisky" until the supplies came in again next spring. That didn't interest Mike in the least.

One afternoon when the storekeeper refused to up his quota Mike raised his rifle and fired into a full cask. As the whisky trickled from the hole, Mike drank his fill and held the storekeeper at bay while he invited everyone else to do the same.

From that time on Mike was ordered to keep away from the store and, denied even the sight and smell of sufficient liquor, his relations with the people at the fort grew more strained. By various tricks he was still managing to get more than his quota of liquor, but it was so far short of what he desired that he became daily more morose and desperate.

Finally he announced that he couldn't get along with such so-and-sos and he'd be damned if he'd be cooped up with them all winter. So, with the help of an orphan boy named Carpenter, he constructed a crude dugout in the clay of the river bank and got ready to spend the winter there.

Carpenter was a boy of about sixteen, a kid Mike had picked up somewhere along the way and whom he claimed to love like his own cub. Since the advent of the boy there'd been no woman-interest in Mike's life, and even in a time and place where such things were not spoken of, the men at the fort didn't think much of a kid living in such rude quarters, especially with a hard-case like Mike Fink. Their efforts to persuade Carpenter to leave him did nothing to improve Mikes' surly disposition.

GRADUALLY he began to distrust even the boy. However, they weathered the winter and were still together in the spring, although their relationship was strained. One afternoon in early April of 1823 a group of Mike's former friends went out to see how he and the boy had survived the winter. They brought along a generous supply of whisky, a commodity that had been in short supply around the little clay dugout all winter.

Mike had never been one to be mellowed by whisky, and this day the more he drank the more he brooded on his real and fancied wrongs.

"Are you goin' to leave me, boy?" he demanded, and at Carpenter's noncommital reply he swung a ham-like fist and knocked the youngster down. The visitors interfered, and after another round of the jug Mike calmed down and agreed to drink with Carpenter. The flareup seemed settled, the relations between the two back to their present uneasy normal.

Mike's frequent boast was that he had taught the boy all he knew and that except for brute strength the kid was practically his equal. As an exhibition of their skill and confidence in each other the two had frequently taken turns shooting a filled cup from the other's head. The distance was usually forty paces, and considering the guns they had, as offhand shooting it was considerable of a feat. It never failed to impress the onlookers, many of whom couldn't even hit a man at that distance.

At the close of the party that afternoon Mike proposed that he and the boy put on this exhibition. Carpenter was willing, so tin cups were filled to the brim with whisky, though Mike flinched a bit at this risking of good liquor.

Mike paced off forty steps and set the cup on his head. Since their argument earlier in the day, Carpenter had been drinking heavily and he was somewhat boisterous and uncertain.

"Git at it, boy. Git at it," Mike chided him, and the kid brought up his rifle. He was shaky and seemed to have a hard time coming onto the target, but Mike held his head steady waiting for the shot.

With the crack of the rifle the cup spun

from Mike's head and the crowd roared approval. Mike alone stood silent, grasping his own rifle and staring at the boy. Slowly he reached up and touched his head and a thin smear of blood stained his fingers. The ball had grazed his scalp, and into Mike's whisky-befuddled brain crept the suspicion that Carpenter had tried to kill him. What else? The boy had never made a bad shot before. Mike's lips lifted in a silent snarl.

Carpenter meanwhile had put a cup on his head and he stood steady and calm to give Mike his turn to shoot. The older man hesitated, looking strangely at the boy.

"What's the matter, Mike? Can't you make that shot no more?" someone in the crowd shouted.

The rifle jerked up suddenly. "Boy," Mike muttered, "I taught you to shoot a heap different than that last shot. You won't do that no more." He brought the muzzle down, fired, and Carpenter slumped forward with a bullet hole squarely in the middle of his forehead.

When Mike sobered up and fully realized what he had done he went to pieces, imploring anyone who would listen to him to believe it had been an accident. Morning and night he could be seen kneeling at the boy's grave, alternately weeping and cursing himself, and still more furiously cursing those who had tried to separate him and the boy. They, he swore, were the cause of all the trouble.

THE men in the fort agreed that Mike Fink was too good a shot, drunk or sober, for the killing to have been an accident. But they were willing to let well enough alone, for Mike's marksmanship was still so good they had no desire to have him come looking for revenge. Only Talbott, the fort's blacksmith, dared to say openly that it had been a cold-blooded killing and Mike should be arrested and brought to trial.

Eventually this came to Mike's ears and for the first time in months he appeared within the walls of the fort. Although, as usual, he carried his rifle cradled on his arm—no one could recall ever seeing him without it—he was a sadly changed man. His grief and remorse, the liquor he'd been guzzling steadily since the boys' death and his lack of food, had left him a mere shell of the old Mike Fink. A sick and beaten man, he looked more like a derelict than a killer out for revenge.

Talbott from the doorway of his shop saw Mike enter the fort and he immediately assumed the old man had come looking for trouble. Going to the rear of the room he picked up and loaded two pistols. Then he went back to the front of the shop.

"Fink," he shouted, "get out of here. Don't come near me. If you do, you're a dead man."

"Talbott," Mike said, "I've heard what you've been saying. I want to talk to you about my boy. You've got me wrong."

"Get away from me, Fink! You're a cold-blooded killer. If you come three steps nearer, I'll fire."

Mike came on, the rifle still across his arm. "Talbott," he pleaded, "just let me talk to you about it. You've accused me of murdering him, the boy I raised from a cub. You've got to let me show you. . ."

Talbott jumped back, expecting every minute that the slow fumbling advance would end in one of Mike's old catlike springs.

"By the Almighty," he shouted, "you've got to stand back! I'll fire if you come a step closer. Don't do it, Fink—don't!"

Still mumbling, Mike put his foot on the bottom step, and simultaneously both of Talbott's pistols roared. The bullets slammed Mike back, but he rocked painfully forward and lurched into the room to lie face-down beside the forge. With terrible effort he half-raised himself and looked at Talbott.

"I never meant to kill my boy, Talbott. I never meant—" His arms buckled and he slumped back to the floor. When they turned him over he was dead.

By some strange chance Talbott himself died within the week when his skiff capsized in the river. They buried him beside Mike Fink and the boy, Carpenter. There they still lie, at the site of the abandoned and forgotten Ashley fort, on a hill overlooking the oily waters of the Big Muddy. No one else was buried on that hill during the fort's brief existence, and so in unmarked graves they sleep together—the orphan boy, the blacksmith and the broken old man, Mike Fink.

With his passing the half-alligator and half-horse breed of man vanished. It was the end of a legend.

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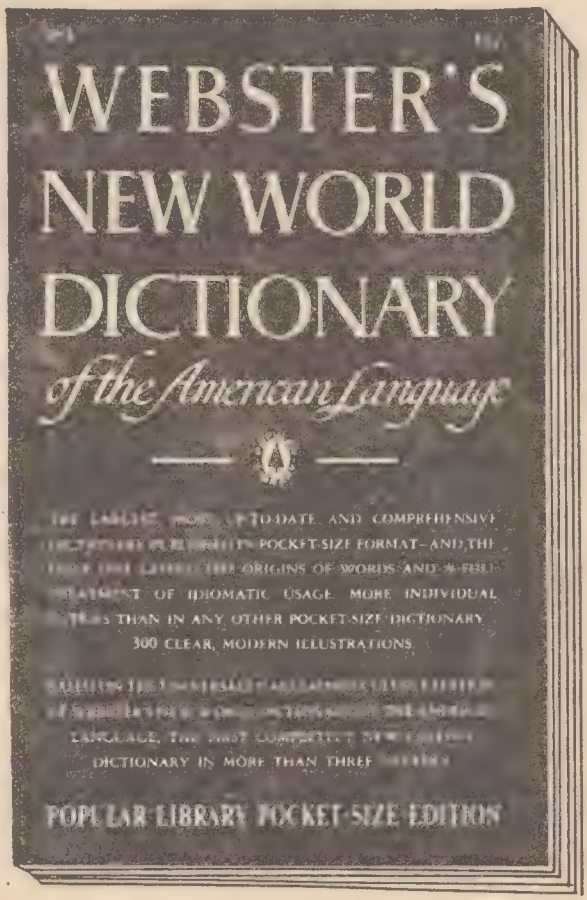

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8-2P

LONG CHANCE

A Novel by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

THE LIVERY stable at San Ramos was bigger than it needed to be, for the size of the town. Sam Mulcahy had laid it out in the old days when all the first settlers of the valley had planned big. Theirs had been the best range in the Territory, with grass belly-deep to a steer in summer. A valley forty miles long by ten or twelve miles wide, well-watered. There had been room for them all to grow, they had thought.

The streets of the town were wide and the buildings were somewhat scattered so that there would be space for others between them. But the others had not come. The kings of the valley, in

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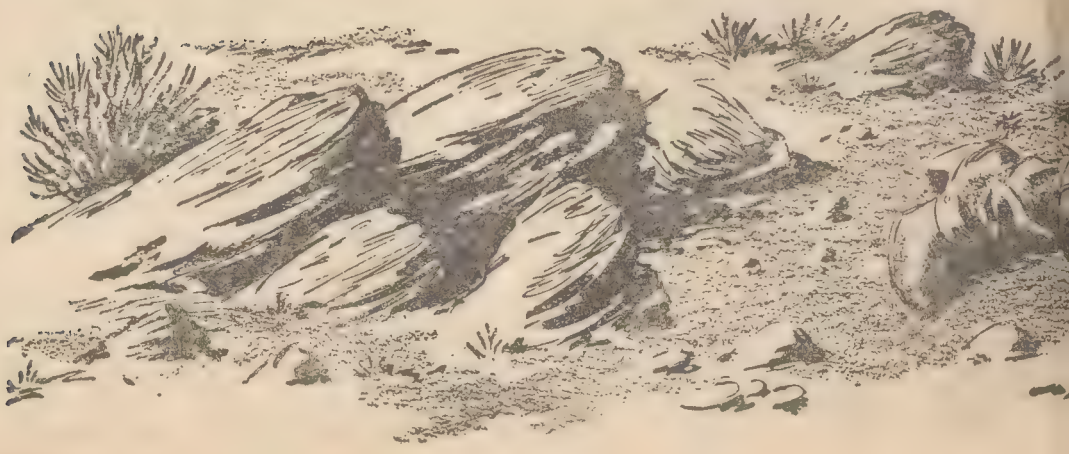

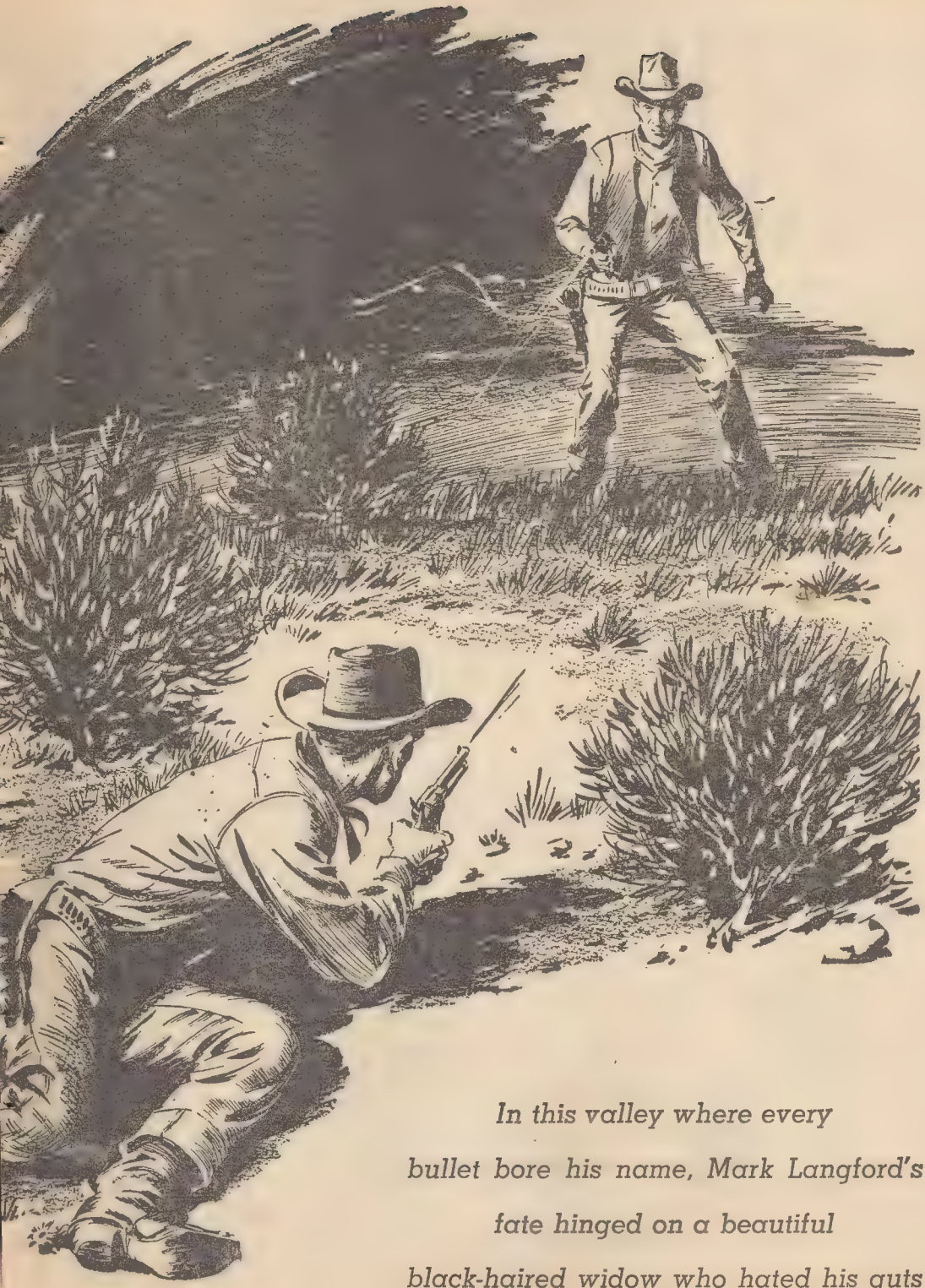

In this valley where every bullet bore his name, Mark Langford's fate hinged on a beautiful black-haired widow who hated his guts

their expansive planning, had overlooked one vital need.

This was an isolated place, too far from any good beef market to be a really prosperous range.

Two years had made little change in it. The adobe wall that formed the big rectangle of the livery had weathered somewhat and was crumbling a little more tonight in the driving rain. The wall enclosed a space about a hundred yards square, and the inside of it was lined with sheds which contained stalls for the horses, space for hay, and places where wagons and such equipment could be stored.

But Sam Mulcahy wasn't bothering to keep his gear under cover any more. Wagons and a buggy or two stood in the open, their rain-wet spokes glistening in the yellow light of the lantern that bobbed in Sam's hand as he came forward to greet the man who had ridden into his yard.

The gaunt, watchful man on the dun reined up. He was a big man and he wore no slicker. His clothing was soaked. His hat was tilted low over his eyes so that his face remained shadowed and water ran in a steady stream from the front of the brim.

"Hell of a night, stranger," Mulcahy said. "But a good rain for the grass—first we've had in months. You can put your horse in that stall over there. The hotel's—"

The oldster's rasping voice trailed away. His eyes had caught sight of the blood on the dun's side. He came closer lifting his lantern as he peered up at the rider's face.

"Mark Langford!" he exclaimed.

"That's right, Sam."

"But, hell!"

THE liveryman glanced quickly toward the gate, which opened on the street. Without saying anything more he hobbled over and closed it, dropping a big wooden latch-bar into place. By the time he returned from the gate Mark Langford had his horse in the stall and was unsaddling.

"Sam," he asked, "is Doc Powys still here?"

"Yeah," Mulcahy hung the lantern on a nail and ran a hand over his bony jaw. "What in hell'd you come back here for?"

Mark ignored the question. The past two years had put tight reins of reserve into him. It was the wary holding-back of a man who had known bad trouble and kept his own counsel.

"Get him, Sam, and have him look after this horse. He got creased there on the flank."

Mulcahy said unevenly, "At first I thought it was you that had got hit. But the shot was aimed at you, I reckon."

"It was. I ran into some hombres down in the Hueco Hills and they tried to turn me back."

"Did they get a good look at you? To know you?"

"I didn't let them get close enough for that."

Mulcahy grunted. "Ben Whelan's new gun-hands, likely. They're touchy, and looking for trouble . . . Mark, why'd you come back here?"

There it was again, the prodding question. Mark leaned against the side of the stall and built a smoke. "I've got something to do here, Sam."

An old man's curiosity was bright in Mulcahy's eyes. "Whatever it is, you'll not get it done. Once this valley knows you're back there'll be a manhunt. They'll either put lead in you or hang you."

Mark held a wet match to the top of the lantern and brought the uncertain flame to the end of his cigarette. "That's a chance I've got to take," he said.

"Dammit, Mark, you know where you stand! You got away once—why didn't you stay away? Where you been all this time?"

Mark gave him a humorless smile. He was thirty now, but he had the look of a man who was older than that.

He said, "I was up in Wyoming, mostly. Worked for a big cattle outfit under a name that wasn't mine, and stayed out in their line camps. I was waiting for something, and a month ago I got the word I needed. Sam, I didn't sell out to those Border-jumping rustlers down here. AND I didn't gun Tol Kinsinger."

Mulcahy spat. "I made some enemies by keeping on saying you hadn't. I figured I knowed you pretty well. I could remember when you was a skinny little button that come in here and climbed up on the wagons and let on you was a big driver. But you was

the sheriff when they caught you, and they caught you proper."

"I was framed, Sam."

"Then why'd you run, after Ben Whelan and the others brought you in?"

"I lost my head. But what could I do but run, with the evidence they had against me?"

"Yeah—yeah, I reckon that's right," Mulcahy admitted.

"Sam, all this time I've been waiting to find out about a brand, one I saw on a rustled yearling up in the hills before they nailed me. I figured it might lead me to whoever it was that framed me and shot me. Sooner or later that cow had to be sold, and the chances were pretty good that it would be sold on this side of the line where prices are better. I've got a friend who's brand reader for the stockyard in El Paso, a man I can trust, and he sent me word when the brand showed up there . . . Sam, who's running a Box F?"

"Mrs. Farber's got that one."

Mark stared blankly. That was the name he had seen in the letter from the brand reader. "Mrs. Laura Farber, of San Ramos, Arizona Territory." But it was a name that didn't mean anything to him. Once again he thought back over the past, his mind going from one remembered face to another.

"I don't know that name," he said thoughtfully. "Are the Farbers new here?"

"She's all by herself, except for the tough crew she's hired. Maybe I should have called her Laura Cory. That was her name before she got married."

CORY! That name was one Mark did know. It fitted into the picture, too. Old Shane Cory had been a lot of things, none of them too good. Cory had come out here during the War, some said. A deserter, a blackleg rebel officer who lived by selling whisky to Indians and by running guns into Mexico.

In Mark's youth Cory had been a stove-up old man who lived in a shack at the valley's southern end, telling tall tales of his past exploits. It had been suspected that he stole a few cattle now and then, selling them in Mexico. But even after Mark had become sheriff he had never caught Cory at it. And the old fellow had died some time before the big trouble had come to the valley.

He'd had no wife, no female relative that Mark knew about.

"Who's this Laura?" he asked.

Mulcahy smirked a little. "Old Shane's daughter. Never lived with him, though. She was married to a gambler up in Colorado but she's a widow now. A looker. Came here about a year after you got—after you left."

"She's on the Cory place?"

"That she is." Mulcahy rubbed a stubbly cheek and peered at Mark curiously. "I reckon you know about your wife?"

"Yes," Mark said shortly. He had heard about Jen. The brand reader had written him about that.

Jen had been another of the mistakes in Mark Langford's life. He had been twenty-seven when he married her and they'd had a year together, the sheriff of San Ramos and his pretty little blonde wife. Maybe if they'd had a child, he thought now, darkly, things might have turned out differently.

But Jen had trapped him into marriage and then she had turned restless, always trying to get him to quit his job and take her somewhere else—California, Texas, anywhere. She had come to San Ramos to work in the hotel, originally. Mark had gradually become aware of the knowing looks the drummers gave her, had heard them greet her in a way that showed they'd known her before.

She had promised repeatedly to be true to him and he guessed that she had, until the big trouble came. Now the scar that reached along the whole left side of his head began to throb a little as he asked softly:

"Is Vidal still around here, Sam?"

"Trem Vidal, yeah," Mulcahy said drily. "He's here."

Vidal had come here before the trouble, a well-dressed, smiling man of average appearance, a man who lived at the hotel and didn't work at anything, yet never lacked for money. A man who had a way with women.

Mulcahy couldn't resist adding, "She went off with him to El Paso, Mark. On their way back here they was on a stage the Indians jumped in Apache Pass. There's some say Vidal let the Indians have her so's he could get away. Ben Whelan and some others went out and got her body and buried her."

Mark let a long breath slide through his nostrils. The bitterness inside him was nothing new, but it was rising with a dark pressure now.

"I'll need one of your horses, Sam," he said. "A good fast one. And see that the dun's taken care of. He's carried me a long way and I'm fond of him."

Mulcahy's eyes took on a sly look. "Seems like that brand I see on him belongs up around Showlow."

"All right, he's not mine. The horse I had gave out and I picked up this one."

"Stole him, maybe?" Mulcahy grinned.

He was an old man and he was testing Mark a little now, to see how much Mark would take.

Two years ago Mark would have taken that as a jibe. But trouble distilled the humor out of a man. He said roughly, "I had to have a horse, damn you. The owner wasn't around so I left a note saying that I'd send money for him when I got it."

Mulcahy shook his head sadly. "You're pretty near down to the bottom notch, Mark. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have a talk with Mrs. Farber," Mark said.

HE RODE up to the Cory Ranch in midafternoon, having kept to the hills at one side of the valley on his way. The place had changed since he had last seen it. He remembered a ramshackle layout consisting of a shack and an open well and a lean-to shed with deer antlers nailed to the front of it. Now the house had been enlarged and painted, and there were new outbuildings, one of them unmistakably a bunkhouse. Two corrals had been built out of peeled poles.

The rain had ended, and the warm sunshine had dried out his clothes. A woman was working with some flowers in the yard, and he rode in boldly.

She turned at the sound of his horse, brushing her loosened, glossy black hair away from her face as she looked up at him. She was a much younger woman than he had expected to see, was his first thought. Then he decided it was the dress she wore which made her look so youthful—no more than a girl.

He dismounted without an invitation from her. "You're Mrs. Farber?" he asked.

She nodded. Her eyes scanned his six-foot height with a coolly impersonal curiosity. "If you're looking for work, stranger, you'll have to talk to—"

"I'm looking for a Mrs. Laura Farber who owns the Box F. I reckon that's you."

Her eyes, dark and lustrous, seemed to grow larger as they widened in alarm. He had not spoken too politely. She seemed to sense the harsh, uncompromising drive that was in him as something inimical to her, personal.

"A long talk with you."

Her chin lifted. "Well, what do you want?" "I'm not sure I want to talk with you. I don't know you."

"I'm Mark Langford."

She frowned a little and lifted a hand to shade her eyes as she looked up at him again. She was a beauty, this Laura Farber, and the way she dressed made it evident that she wanted that fact to be noticed. She was an odd sort of ranch woman, Mark thought, with her lithe, leggy body clothed in silk that was pressed against her figure by the wind. The dress was cut low, and molded to the shapely mounds of her breasts. She'd be about twenty-five or so—young to be a widow.

A look of wondering comprehension had come to her face. "Mark Langford," she said, then she was looking at his scar, the ugly welt that began above and behind his ear and ended just back of his eye. She was being sorry for him now. The pity that came into her eyes showed it. "You were the sheriff who—"

"We don't need to go over all that," he said roughly, interrupting her. "Have you marketed any cattle lately?"

"No, we haven't sold any at all. We think the market will get better, so we're holding for the present."

"You're a good actress, Mrs. Farber. You see, I happen to know that a bunch of Box F beef was sold in El Paso three months ago."

She stiffened angrily. "You're saying I'm a liar, Mr. Langford!"

"That's about it."

She seemed too angry for speech for a moment. Then she said, "Get out of here!"

"Not yet. We're going to have that talk.

"Mark Langford," she said, "get out of here!"

We're going to talk about a bunch of yearlings that were rustled two years ago and were sold when they got big enough to be butchered. The Box F brand was put on them when they were stolen. It wasn't registered then, but it is now. Your brand, Mrs. Farber."

"I told you we haven't sold . . . What makes you think any cattle were stolen?"

"I got a good look at some of them when I surprised the rustlers around a branding fire up in Muerto Canyon. They were branded Box F, and it had been done with a running iron. I looked at your stock as I rode in just now, and I see you've grown prosperous enough to buy a stamp iron, Mrs. Farber." He paused the briefest moment before he added, "Box F."

Her dark eyes flashed in fury. "What you're talking about is impossible! You say the cattle you saw were stolen and branded two years ago. Well, the Box F brand was not put on them then, because it wasn't in existence until several months after the time you're talking about. And I didn't come down here at all until last year."

"I saw the brand, Mrs. Farber. And you've sold the cattle."

LAURA FARBER moved closer to Mark. She was not as tall as he had thought. Even standing, she still had to look up as her eyes quested over his face as if in search of indication that he was lying.

"I wonder—" She spoke musingly, as

though to herself. Then her long lashes screened her eyes, and when she spoke again all her fury seemed to have fled as she said impulsively, "You look tired out, Mr. Langford. How long since you've eaten? Come up to the house and I'll fix you a meal, and you can talk all you want to. But I warn you I'll talk right back. Is that a bargain?"

"All right, it's a bargain."

She gave him a fleeting smile and, turning her back to him, hurried up the path.

He loosened the cinch for his livery horse, and turned to follow her. One corner of his mind toyed with a thought about how odd it was that she should offer to feed him after the accusation he had thrown at her. But maybe she had heard it was the custom of the range country to feed a hungry rider. And certainly the soft fullness of her lips seemed to show hers was a generous nature.

She had stopped on the porch and turned her head to look back to make sure he was coming. His throat tightened. He was thinking more about Laura Farber than about his own danger now. She was all woman, with a slender waist and curving hips, and her body stirred lithely under her dress when she moved. It had been a long time since Mark Langford had been close to any woman, and he never had seen another like this one.

It must have showed in his eyes. Color came to her cheeks and she fled through the open door.

Just inside she stopped, snatched up a rifle that had been standing against the wall, and whirled back with the weapon in her hands.

She didn't say anything. He gave her no chance. He was close to the porch and he leaped into it, cold fear thrusting him forward. He knew she was frightened, scared enough to shoot him. He had talked roughly, and she seemed to be alone here. Besides, the scar on his temple made him tough-looking. No, he couldn't blame her much, but his life depended upon his getting that gun away from her before she could fire.

It was a close thing. He batted the barrel to one side just as it erupted crashing sound. As the bullet wailed away into the air he grabbed her, not being careful how he grabbed. She was soft and rounded, but she fought him with a strength he had not expected to find in a woman. They locked together as she writhed, trying to free herself sufficiently to lift the rifle. She got it up and tried to hit him with it. He wrenched it from her, flung it aside, and slammed her back against the door jamb.

In this moment she would have liked nothing better than to have killed him. It showed in her eyes, in the furious urgency of her breathing. She had tricked him with her talk of feeding him, wanting only to get within reach of the rifle, and that had failed. Now her eyes were hating him.

But he heard a sound of running boots now. A man had come up from the bunkhouse and was pounding into the yard. A man of Mark's height, but with a wiry build and a darkly oily thin face. Lips curling in anticipation, he darted a hand to his gun.

Mark wheeled to face him and reached for his own weapon. But he was a fraction of a second too late. Laura Farber had jerked it from the holster and now was drawing herself up, pulling back the hammer.

"You can put your gun away, Luke," she called, with a small triumphant smile. "It's just that blackleg sheriff they ran out of here once. Throw him off the ranch, but don't kill him. I expect the Kinsinger boys will want to do that."

The man in the yard slowed down, saying, "It'll be a pleasure, Laura." He unbuckled his gun-belt and tossed the heavy rig aside, watching Mark with a fixed smile.

MARK knew this Luke's kind. He was a gunman of the sort who hired out to whoever would pay his kind of wages. His presence here tended to confirm the suspicions Mark had about Laura Farber. Mark glanced at her briefly, admiring her in a different way than before. Not many women would have had the courage nor the presence of mind to do what she had just done.

Then he jumped off the porch, letting the impetus of his plunge slam his weight against Luke.

Both went down, but quickly scrambled to their feet, trading blows, each man feeling out the other. Luke was a crafty fighter, and a wicked one. He struck, feinted to get Mark off-guard, then struck again. Mark was driven back, sensing that he would have to end this

fight quickly or he could not win it. Luke was fresh, and as full of energy as a steel spring. Mark had had a long ride and little food, and would wear down quickly.

But it was the girl who represented Mark's greatest danger now. She had his gun and she could walk over and pick up the rifle as well if she chose to do so. Even if he won out against Luke, Mark still would lose in the end.

He swung savagely at his opponent, trying to land a damaging blow. Luke dodged, danced away, then darted in again with a sneer curling thin lips as he flicked blows to Mark's face. He was taking his time, making a good show of it for the woman's benefit, Mark thought.

But Luke was worried, too. His blows had been aimed to hurt and to enrage Mark, make him lose his head. Luke, then, was afraid of Mark's strength.

Mark let him think he was succeeding in his little scheme. Mark swung widely, clumsily, to give Luke the idea he had the advantage. When Luke laughed and rushed again, Mark was ready for him. One of his fists landed solidly and doubled the gunman over. The other fist seemed just barely to graze Luke's jaw, but the impact of the blow ran up Mark's arm. Luke's head was snapped far to one side and a groan of agony escaped him.

Mark seized him quickly, lifted him and pitched him onto the porch. His body struck Laura Farber. Rough treatment for a woman, Mark thought, but she deserved it. Man and woman went down. There was a flash of long, tapering legs as she scrambled away. And the impact had knocked Mark's gun from her hand. He leaped to the porch and scooped up the weapon.

"Stand over there," he told her.

Luke got up shakily. Blood trickled from one corner of his mouth and in his eyes was a wild look. His breathing was ragged.

"Start walking," Mark ordered, gesturing with his gun. "Not back to the bunkhouse—strike out across the range. There's a rifle here and I'll be watching to see that you keep going in a straight line till you're out of sight."

The gunman gave Mark a smoldering look. But he was beaten now. He stumbled down from the porch and crossed the yard, not trying to pick up his own gun as he passed it, and struck out in the direction Mark had indicated.

Laura Farber said, "Luke's not finished with you, mister. He'll use a gun on you next time. He'll kill you, Langford. It's my fault he didn't get to use his gun on you here."

"Yeah." Mark was spent and shaking. The fight had taken the last reserves of his energy. He leaned against the wall, watching the figure of the gunman become fore-shortened in the immensity of the range. Then he smiled at Laura mockingly. "You were going to fix me some grub, remember?" He gestured with the gun. "We'll go in the house now."

She looked at him with an odd intentness. "You're pretty much of a man, Langford. How did you happen to let Whelan and the rest of them run you out of here two years ago?"

"That's a long story." He looked toward the bunkhouse. "Any more of your crew down there?"

"No," she said, and her eyes told him frankly that she regretted it. "Luke was sleeping today because he worked last night."

"Night's still the best time for the wide loop, eh?"

She lifted her head as if to make an angry retort, but said instead, "All right, stick to your stubborn notion. . . .Well, you're in charge for the present, I guess." She went into the house.

Mark followed her, but she tried no more tricks. He sat down at the table in the kitchen, rubbing his knuckles and his bruised face, while she cooked a steak and potatoes, and made coffee. When she placed the food before him he ate with his left hand, his gun at his elbow.

"Careful, aren't you?" Smiling wanly, she slipped into a chair opposite him. "I'm curious about you, Langford. You were the sheriff of San Ramos County, and were helping some rustlers, wasn't that it? You got caught and you killed Tol Kinsinger, the man who caught you. Then you ran. Now you're back. Why?"

A little of his coffee spilled from the cup as he lifted it. Have to get some sleep soon, he thought.

Aloud he said, "I did one of those things, Mrs. Farber. I ran. I didn't do either of the

other two. Isn't that reason enough for me to come back?"

"No. If what I've heard about you is true you couldn't possibly clear yourself. Why get killed trying?"

"Maybe you wouldn't savvy how it is. But I grew up in this valley. My folks were killed by Apaches when I was seven and I was raised by Eli Yount, the first sheriff here. When he died I was elected to the office. I had a lot of friends here, and my folks are buried down at San Ramos. I figure I owe something to all of them."

She frowned. "You men do things for the darnedest stubbornest reasons! But why come to me? And what gave you the notion that the Box F had been used before it was even in existence?"

"I told you I saw that brand. When did you begin using it?"

She gave him a steady look. "I can't tell you, exactly. I guess you knew Shane Cory—my father. I never lived here, though, and I don't even remember what he looked like. My mother died when I was born and I lived with her people in Denver. It—wasn't a happy home. I ran away and married when I was quite young. My husband was a gambler, and we lived in mining camps. Maybe you know what kind of a life that is. He was killed, and then I got word that my father had died, so I decided to come down here and start ranching. I—knew what sort of outfit he had, but I wanted to do things differently.

"It took a long time to settle my husband's affairs, though. I got in touch with Dr. Powys, who had sent word to me of my father's death, and asked him to recommend a capable man who could get things started for me down here and handle everything until I could come down myself. I sent what money I could so a crew could be hired, the place put in order, stock bought—"

"When was that?"

"About two years ago, give or take a month or two. I don't remember the exact dates."

"Who was the man Powys recommended?"

"Mr. Vidal. Trem Vidal."

Mark's mouth tightened. He didn't say anything.

She leaned forward. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except that it may show you how wrong you are. I didn't know a thing about ranching, and I was lucky to get the help of a man who is as good a manager—foreman—as Trem is. I had to begin in a small way, but we—well, we prospered. Oh, we haven't sold any stock, as you seem to think, but we have several hundred head almost ready to market."

"We?"

"Yes. Mr. Vidal is my partner now. We've bought some other ranches, you see. He lives in town, and when you first came out here today I started to tell you that you'd have to see him if you wanted a job."

HARD muscles crawled and tightened along Mark Langford's jaw. He thought he knew, now, why Laura Farber dressed as she did. Trem Vidal was her partner. And Vidal was the sort to like his women flashy.

She divined his thoughts almost as if he had spoken them aloud. But there was little doubt she would know all about Vidal and Jen Langford.

She colored as she said, "I know what you're thinking about me, Langford, but you're wrong there, too. Trem and I are going to be married. But until we are, I'm not his mistress, nor any man's. Just because a woman happens to be a widow, people think she—"

"That's none of my concern. But you said you and your—ah—friend had prospered. Has there been much rustling lately?"

"That's not the way we've prospered!" she snapped. "But—well, yes, there's been a lot of it. We've had to hire extra men to guard our stock. Some of the ranchers have given up after losing almost all their herds, sold out and moved away. It was hard enough for them here, having to drive their market beef all the way to El Paso and finding small market there, without having this other trouble."

"Those are the ranches you and Vidal bought?"

"Yes. I bought one of them. Trem bought the other two. We operate all four ranches as a unit."

"Under the Bar F brand?"

"Yes. It's easier to handle the stock that way."

Mark smiled at her meaningly. "Got those ranches cheap, didn't you? Rustling can pay off in more ways than one!"

She jumped up, saying hotly, "Langford, I don't have to listen to—"

"Yes, you do. For the present we'll say that Vidal has you fooled, though you don't seem to be a woman that anybody could fool too easily. Anyway, we'll say he's got you located up here where you'll be out of the way while he plays his game as he sees fit."

"You're jumping to conclusions!"

"Yes," he admitted, "I am. But they're sound ones, I think. Vidal needed a brand as a cover-up for his rustling, and you supplied him with one. He started using it right away. Now he's cashing in—"

"You're the one who's the fool! If you weren't, you wouldn't be sitting here making this crazy kind of talk. You haven't much time, you know. Luke will go straight to Trem and they'll come out here at once. She leaned forward, putting her hands on the table. "And for your own good, you'd better be wrong about Trem. If you're right, he and his crew will—" She broke off, her eyes shadowed as if by some somber thought she didn't want to voice. "Langford, what makes you so sure about my foreman, Trem Vidal?"

"It all adds up. He started with nothing—no land, no cattle. Now he's getting big fast. And like I've told you, I saw the Box F on rustled cattle two years ago. Before I could do anything about that I was framed for murder, run out of the valley. What would you think if you were in my place, Mrs. Farber?"

"I—I don't know." She pushed back her hair. "You've got me so confused I don't know what to think. But I've told you I know nothing about all that, so you've wasted your time here."

"Not quite." He leaned back, smiling at her now. "You're a fine cook. And you're going to help me."

"Help *you?* Don't make me laugh, mister!"

Mark said, "You'll do it, all right. I need ammunition and grub, and I haven't got the money to buy them. So you're going to give them to me and I'm going back into the hills and find out what's been happening to the rustled stock. I don't think it's been driven across the Border, because down there prices are so low. You and Vidal got those other ranches cheap, but it took some money just the same—"

He stopped, seeing that her mouth was tight and her eyes were darkly wrathful again.

"None of it came from cattle sales," she snapped. "Because we haven't sold any. The one ranch I bought with my own money. Trem used his own money to buy the others."

"Money that he didn't have two years ago," Mark said. "He had to wait until you gave him a start, didn't he? Why don't you answer?"

She bit her lip.

MARK went on, "It's easy to see that you're enough in love with the hombre to be blinded. But somebody's going to get hurt here before I'm finished, and if you're in the clear it's to your own interest to help me now."

She was quiet for a minute, her breathing slow and steady. Then she said, "All right. I don't know why I'm doing this, though. I don't think I trust you at all, Mark Langford. I thought I was a good judge of men but I can't tell whether you're the best liar I ever met or whether... Well, it doesn't matter. You've got a gun and that makes you the boss

in this country, doesn't it?"

She went to a cupboard and took down bags of coffee and beans and sugar. Then she went out on the back porch and got a portion of a side of bacon from a cooler. After stuffing the food into an empty flour sack she went into the parlor, with Mark following, and took two boxes of .44 shells from a shelf.

When he left the house she followed him into the yard. As he stepped into his saddle she looked up at him, saying suddenly:

"I wish you luck, Langford."

"Why that?" he asked roughly.

"I don't know why. Maybe it's because you've had sense enough not to try to force yourself on me as some men would have done. Or it might be because you haven't got anything left to go on but your luck."

"I don't want your sympathy, Mrs. Farber. I'm thanking you for the grub, but I warn you that if you've had any part in Vidal's game I'll see you go to prison just like he will."

"Now you're banking on your luck buying you something in the future. That doesn't pay, Langford. Any gambler can tell you that luck is like a woman—crowd it too much and it turns against you."

He didn't answer that. He rode away from the Box F, swinging toward the end of the valley and the Muerto Canyon country beyond. Just before he passed into the grove of oaks which grew at the higher elevation he looked back. Laura Farber was still standing in front of her house, still watching him.

After riding for some time he made his way to a small boy canyon he remembered and spent the remainder of the day there, resting both himself and the livery horse. When night came he bedded down a dozen paces from his dying fire with his gun lying across his chest. But the only sounds during the night were the deep hooting of owls and the distant clamor of coyotes.

In the morning he bathed in a spring in the canyon. With a stick he beat some of the trail dust from his clothing, then dressed. After eating a slim breakfast he saddled up and rode out.

His body was erect in the saddle now. The long rest had refreshed him, bringing about a return of his vigor. His mind was working clearly, and for a little while he permitted himself to think about Laura Farber.

She was a puzzle. He had been rough with her and yet, while accepting his command of the situation, she hadn't really been afraid of him at all. She had said that she was a good judge of men, and maybe she had been right about that. She was new to this raw land and yet she seemed to fit into it, more so than many women who were scared all the time and clung to some man for protection.

Yet she dressed to please Trem Vidal's eyes. Mark cursed the man silently. Vidal was luckier than he had any right to be, and Mark hoped he was right about the man's connection with the rustling. Mark Langford yearned to smash Trem Vidal.

Laura would fight him on that. Vidal was her business partner and she was in love with him as well, so she would stand up for him. Fighting a woman wasn't a pleasant prospect, and she might be a dangerous adversary as well. But Mark had no alternative. He was alone, a hunted man. He couldn't afford to coast along and be gallant to anyone, not even Laura Farber.

Perhaps, he thought, he shouldn't have talked to her so frankly. She could warn Vidal of his suspicions, arm the man against him. Well, it was done now. He shrugged and gigged his horse along.

HE RODE higher into the hills now, crossing ridges and swinging over to the head of Muerto Canyon. At the brink of the big cut he reined in, peering down into the depths of the steep-walled defile.

Muerto was a dangerous place. Here at its upper end there were few ways to get down into it, and those trails followed ledges where a man or a horse could lose his footing and fall for hundreds of feet. At the lower end it opened out onto the desert country. In reality Muerto wasn't just one canyon but a whole system of canyons, all of them connecting with the main one. It was a good place to hide cattle.

A bird soared up past the brink on whistling wings, spooking Mark's horse for a moment. He quieted the animal and built his first smoke since breakfast, waiting for the sun to lift higher and dispel some of the shadows below.

It had been here that Mark Langford, as sheriff of San Ramos county, had first happened onto the Box F rustling. It had been a matter of the merest luck, that discovery. And it had turned into disaster for him.

In his days as sheriff Mark had ridden rustlers pretty hard. There hadn't been any serious cattle thievery then, nothing that would force ranchers to give up and leave the San Ramos. Just the annoying, penny-ante stuff, like the Kinsinger boys, Joe and Alf, grabbing a little jag of someone's stock and night-driving it across the Border to finance a tequilla spree. They hadn't needed to do it, being the sons of an established rancher. But there had been a mean streak in both of them, and they had craved excitement.

There had been few of their kind. Most of the rustlers were like Manuel Gonzales, who had been crowded out of the valley on account of his race, and eked out an existence by running a little stock into Mexico. Shane Cory, Mark had suspected, had done a little, too.

All of that had been two-bit stuff, done by men who were content with what little they got for cattle in Mexico. Mark had run into rustling of a different kind when he had chanced to ride past Muerto that day two years ago.

The ever-present wind that swept up the canyon had brought to him a smell of smoke. Branding-fire smoke, mingled with the smell of burned hair.

He had gone down and had surprised the rustlers at their fire. It had been nearly dark and he hadn't managed to get close enough to recognize any of them. They had done some shooting and had escaped, and he had lost track of them in the maze of canyons.

What they'd had here was a big operation, though, so Mark had gone back to San Ramos to organize a posse. He hadn't been able to do that. His discovery had made him so dangerous to the rustlers that they had dealt with him quickly.

He rose in his stirrups now. The constant wind of the canyon had brought a smell to him before, but with it this time came a sound. The distant bawling of cattle, many of them.

He dismounted and led his horse back from the brink. Loosening the saddle cinch, he tied the mount to a scrub oak and worked his way along the canyon rim afoot.

No horse could travel here. The hills crowded up to the rim of the canyon, steep, and covered with loose rock. Mark worked his way along, clinging to bushes in some places and scrambling over huge boulders in others.

This time he was going to play it smarter than before. He wasn't going down into the canyon. These cattle would be guarded, and it would be suicide for a man to go down there alone. From the rim he should be able to see about how many cattle there were, and locate the rustler's camp. Once he knew that, he could decide what to do about it.

He had gone nearly half a mile when he saw the first of the cattle. They seemed tiny down there. About fifty in a bunch. At this distance he couldn't read their brands but he could see that they were gaunted, restless because of the poor graze on the canyon floor. They had been held there a long time, he thought, and he wondered about that.

PRESENTLY he came opposite the first fork of the canyon, where a branch ran out from the far wall. Sweating from his exertions now, Mark worked his way to a position from which he could see up the branch canyon. More cattle there—fully five hundred in that bunch.

He swore to himself. There must be enough cattle in Muerto now to plug the El Paso market for months. Why should men steal cattle, then starve them here on scant feed. They must be waiting for something.

Mark scowled and wondered—for what?

A sound of voices came to his ears. At first he thought it was a trick of the canyon wind, bringing the voices to him from somewhere far below. Then he heard a horse blow and knew that it was close, very close.

Drawing his gun he moved ahead. A jumble of rocks had rolled down from a higher slope and had lodged on the rim here. He was forced to inch his way past them with nine hundred feet of sheer wall below him. But he had to get closer to the voices, close enough to hear what was being said.

The wind tugged at him, hissed softly through the needles of a stunted pine that

grew here. He gripped the gnarled trunk to steady himself and squeezed through between it and a rock. Jerking his sixgun tightly back against his body, he flattened himself against the rock, his breathing rigidly controlled and soundless.

The voices he had heard were closer than he had thought. They were the voices of men in a little camp on a level space not twenty feet distant. And apparently they had been there for quite a spell, judging from the pile of ashes where they had made their fires.

A tarp, propped up by sticks, was stretched over their blankets. Beyond the camp a rude corral had been fashioned by tying poles to the trunks of wind-bent trees. Four horses stood in there, slack-hipped, switching their tails at flies. One of the horses blew again.

In his swift look Mark had seen only two men. Ordinary-looking men with sleep still in their eyes. One had been lifting a pail of water, drinking from it. The other had been pulling on his boots. They hadn't as yet buckled on their gunbelts, but four rifles were propped in a row against the exposed root of a tree, handy to the blankets.

They had the look of having been perched on this vantage point to watch the cattle, for a long time. And they were tired of it.

Cautiously, Mark looked past the rock again. Another man got up from the blankets and stood stretching himself in his underwear. A fourth man, still in his bed, grumbled and rolled over.

The man with the water pail put it down and wiped his mustache with the back of his hand. He tilted his head, seeming to listen.

"Somebody's coming," he said. "If it's the boss I aim to tell him I've had enough of this to last me. He'll let me off this damn rock so's I can go hear some music and see some spangles or I'll quit him flat. I'll tell him right out, this time—"

"Hell, you will," another jeered. "You start talking quit and he'll sic Luke Rucker on you. The boss ain't likely to take chances on you going down to Ramos and babbling what you know."

The two who were dressed picked up rifles, but put them down again when a rider jogged down a switchbacked trail and into the camp.

"Hell, Shorty," one of them said, "you sure lathered that horse getting out here. What was your hurry?"

THE rider stepped down from saddle. He was an old man, and had a battered look. He rolled a cigarette and, without lighting it, stuck it in one corner of his mouth.

Then he said morosely, "There's trouble, boys. You fellers wasn't here when the sheriff that was here a couple years back bothered us, but he's around again, so you better watch out for him. Big hombre with brown hair, don't smile much. He's got a mean-looking scar now, right above his ear. You'll know him by that. Boss says to put lead in him if you see him!"

The man who had not yet risen propped himself up on an elbow. Mark could see now that he had fiery red hair.

"Why ain't Luke Rucker taking care of the hombre?" he complained. "He's drawing the fancy pay—we ain't."

Shorty chuckled. "Luke's out looking for him all right. They tangled already, at the widow's place. Luke got run off afoot, Big Red."

"Hell you say! What was ailing him? Supposed to be a trouble-shooter, ain't he? That's what Vidal pays him for ain't it?"

"Claims the widow got in the way, and he sure wouldn't shoot *her*. When he rode in to tell the boss about it that face of his had as mean a look as I ever seen. I don't reckon our man'll get this far."

Big Red laughed. "Makes the second time Luke got run off from that widow, don't it? Seems like I heard she done it herself the first time!"

"Better hold rein on that talk, Red," Shorty warned. "If the boss was to hear about it—"

"It wouldn't displease me none to see Luke Rucker cut down to size," growled the man in the blankets. But he sat up with a broad grin on his red-stubbled face. "That widow, though, she makes a man wonder. Dressing like she does and all—"

The talk ran on. It was the sort of talk to be expected from such men as these, and in this raw land where a pretty woman who lived alone was concerned. Wickedly speculative talk.

Mark's jaws were tight. He had been lucky here, and had learned what he needed to know without having to use a gun. His guess had been right all along. Vidal was running this thing.

Mark eased away, squeezing between the pine trunk and the rock, careful to make no sound. His gunbelt caught on a projection of the trunk and he twisted around to free it. As he did, the rough bark dislodged two of the shells in the belt. He grabbed for them, missed.

The shells dropped to the rock underfoot. They didn't go off, but they bounced and clattered with a metallic sound that seemed loud in the sudden stillness of the camp.

"What was that?" one of the lookouts said sharply.

Mark wrenched away from the tree. There was a sound of moving boots in the camp now and a hushed voice said, "Somebody's behind that big rock, boys. Scatter out!"

Mark edged along the rim, fear darting through him as a pebble rolled under his boot and he teetered on the edge, with his balance almost lost. He lunged to firmer ground, his fingers digging into a crevice for support, then lunged ahead.

The thought came to him that he was running again. But there was no point in facing the odds that five men represented. He had the information he needed now, and with it he could go back to San Ramos Valley and make his stand.

Rifle shots crashed out in swift succession, their echoes rolling up and down the canyon. Slugs spanged from the boulders, but those boulders were protecting Mark now. The ruggedness of the canyon rim, slashed as it was by deep gullies, helped him, too. He dodged from rock to rock, flung himself down into gullies, scrambled up and went on, protected by a headland. The rustlers kept on firing, but they were wasting shells now.

When he reached his horse Mark was winded and spent. He had to pull himself into the saddle. Vidal's men hadn't attempted to follow him in the dangerous run along the rim, but their fire had been more accurate than he had thought. In his left sleeve was a big gash, and Mark was surprised to see blood running along his arm.

THE wound wasn't anything more than a deep scratch, but it kept bleeding stubbornly. And so, since Vidal's men would saddle up and try to cut him off between here and San Ramos anyhow, Mark headed along the Border instead.

He made a big circle that brought him, in late afternoon, to a small basin high in the hills that overlooked the valley.

Manuel Gonzales lived in this barren place now. He had a one-room shack and a *ramada* that shaded an iron bedstead and a cooking stove that were used in the summertime. Dogs and chickens prowled about the place, on ground that had been swept by Manuel's woman.

The Mexican came out to meet Mark. He was a gray little man who would be nearly sixty now. He looked at Mark with evident surprise, but said nothing at first.

No reason why he should be glad to see me, Mark thought. He said, "Howdy, Manuel. Long time. I need some water and a piece of clean cloth."

Manuel's eyes had traveled down to the wound. "*Si.* Get down and come in house. My woman will fix it for you."

She was a little woman who moved about on bare feet, but she was careful. She boiled the rag in water before she bandaged Mark's wound with it. Manuel sat silently smoking, watching Mark's face. Mark grinned at him, feeling an odd comradeship with him now.

"You can talk, Manuel. I'm not sheriff any more."

"*Si,*" Manuel spat. "Senor Angus is sheriff now."

Mark wasn't surprised by that, exactly. Del Angus, the storekeeper down in San Ramos, had run for the office before. He was a portly, flabby little man with no drive in him at all. He would always do exactly what Ben Whelan, his biggest customer, told him to do. Perhaps that was why he carried the star now.

"He doesn't give you as bad a time as I did, I reckon," Mark said.

Manuel's smile flashed in the gloom. "No. But I don' rutsle any more. Too dangerous now."

"There's more of it than ever, I hear tell."

"*Si.* Some rancher have go broke because of it. They sell out and leave the valley."

"Sold to Trem Vidal, didn't they? A man would think Vidal was swinging the wide loop to get himself some cheap land."

Manuel's brown face was carefully expressionless. "Senor, I don't know about this."

"Hell, you don't," Mark jibed. "I know you mighty well, Manuel. You savvy more about the San Ramos than anybody else. You've got a lot of friends, and you get around. Muerto Canyon's full of rustled beef that's been held there for a long time. Vidal's boys are guarding it. Why?"

Manuel lifted a shoulder. "Maria, make some food. This hombre ride me hard one time but always he is fair." He looked at Mark shrewdly. "You got the wound in Muerto, I think. Why you come back and look for the trouble?"

It was the same question they all had asked —Sam Mulcahy, Laura Farber, and now Manuel. Mark took a long time before he answered. Maybe it wasn't worth the risk, this trying to pull the wreckage of a man's life back together again. And yet—

"I'm just stubborn, Manuel. Ben Whelan's got the biggest outfit in the valley. How's he taking this rustling?"

"He make the big fight, senor. He bring in the gunhands and every night they ride the valley."

It had been those men, Mark thought, who had shot at him down in the Hueco Hills. They had been covering the approach to San Ramos, turning away all strange riders. Ben Whelan was acting in a pretty highhanded manner, but that had always been his way.

A smile flickered on Manuel's brown face. He leaned forward. "Vidal has move' right down the valley," he said. "Firs' he buy the Kearney place, right nex' to his Box F. Then the Trecker place and then the Sanders place." Manuel grinned broadly, a wicked pleasure showing in his eyes. "That bring him up against the B W, don' it? And Senor Wheler has got him stopped. Me, I am jus' the little hombre, but I like to watch this!"

MARK asked, "They haven't been able to whittle down Whelan's herds, then?"

"No senor. Too dangerous." Manuel chuckled. "But maybe they don't have to. Maybe Senor Vidal has figure out another way."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe I talk too much, senor. But the sister of my Maria is still cook at Senor Whelan's house. She tell me that Carrie Whelan meet Vidal out at line cabins. Sometime' she go right into town to the hotel where he live." Manuel's mouth curled. He hated old Ben Whelan, and with reason. "I think maybe Vidal mary her and get the B W that way, no?"

Mark scowled. The pattern of things in the valley was beginning to shape up in his mind now. Vidal wasn't rustling for the immediate return that he could expect from the sale of the stock. He was after something bigger and more enduring. He was after the land itself, land that could support thousands of cattle in all the years to come. It seemed probable that he wanted the whole valley. He planned big, and he would have a cattle empire!

Mark's hatred for the man made his pulse throb under the scar at his temple.

The part about Carrie Whelan puzzled him, though. Old Ben's daughter had been eighteen when Mark had left the valley. A pouty blonde who flirted boldly with the cowhands until her father roared at her. She would be impressed by a man like Vidal, perhaps; but that still would leave old Ben as an obstacle to Vidal's plans, an obstacle that would stand solidly in his way.

And Ben Whelan would live for years yet.

Mark scowled, wondering suddenly what all this meant for Laura Farber.

Just after sundown he left the Gonzales place. Manuel had fed him, and that was something he hadn't expected of the man he had repeatedly jailed for rustling. Yet he hadn't been too rough with Manuel in the old days at that. His sympathies had been with the little Mexican, and Manuel had sensed that. Now it was the other way around.

Reining up on a high ridge, Mark looked down over the expanse of the valley where lights were beginning to show in the town and in the windows of the scattered ranch houses. Three of the houses were dark, abandoned—The three between the Box F and the B W. Vidal had moved straight down the valley, but had been stopped by the might represented by

the big, brightly-lighted Whelan house.

Mark wondered if Vidal would allow himself to be stopped there for long. If he could contrive to get the B W all the ranches in the lower valley would soon fall to him. None of them had the stubborn will that Ben Whelan had, nor the money to hire gunhands.

Mark shoved his hat back, frowning in the darkness. Maybe he was going ahead too fast, building too much on guesswork. Manuel, yearning for trouble to come to old Ben Whelan, might have been too eager to accept mere gossip. Vidal might be merely amusing himself with Carrie. Though why would the man do that, when a woman like Laura—

Mark's eyes swung to the Box F house, where a light glowed in a window. Without consciously willing it he turned his horse in that direction.

When he reached the place, he moved in afoot. Luke would be around here somewhere and Mark didn't want trouble with him at present. He saw that the light was in Laura's bedroom. The window was open, a night breeze stirring the thin curtains. She was in front of a mirror, brushing her hair.

She wore a dress much like the one he had seen her wearing before. Her body moved with an easy rhythm as she stroked the brush.

Mark said softly, "Mrs. Farber."

She came quickly around, facing the window as he put a leg over the sill and entered.

"Mark Langford," she said, "get out of here!"

"No. And don't you yell for help, Laura. I've got to talk to you, and I don't want Luke interrupting me."

"You'll not talk in here. Go into the parlor."

"I'll follow you as you go."

Her nostrils widened. "You think I'd try to—"

"You did once. I've found out some things you ought to know about. Want to listen to them, and no tricks?"

FOR a long moment she studied his face. Then she picked up the lamp and went into the parlor. Mark followed her closely, picked out a chair and sat down. She faced him tensely, looking at his torn sleeve and at the blood-stained bandage.

"You've been wounded," she said.

"Just scratched. I was lucky. Now listen to me. Vidal's a crook, like I thought he was. But he's playing a bigger game than I'd guessed. The thing is, he's holding a big bunch of rustled stock in the hills, and your brand may be on a lot of it, against the chance that he may eventually sell it. That puts you in a mighty bad position. What you should do is get yourself untangled from that partnership as soon as you can, because hell's going to break loose in this valley when I—"

She was shaking her head, her glossy hair swaying from side to side. "I won't listen to you, Langford. I've done a lot of thinking about you and I've decided you're a liar and a troublemaker. You're trying to upset everything I've planned, and—" She stopped and moved toward him, her hands moving nervously up and down her upper arms. "What makes you so sure this time?"

"I've seen the cattle. I heard his men talking, and they brought Vidal's name into it."

He didn't tell her that her name had been mentioned as well. Too bad, he thought now, looking at the dark loveliness of her eyes and the curve of her cheek. She was a woman who would be capable of passion that would reward a man. When she was near like this she stirred him as no other woman had. Perhaps if they had known each other long ago, before life kicked both of them around—

She moistened her lips, saying, "Tell me. Tell me what you saw, what you heard."

MARK told Laura Farber what he had seen in Muerto Canyon two years ago, and what he had seen up there today.

He asked then, "Did you tell Vidal to pick out a brand for you, when you wrote to him down here and told him to get things started for you?"

"Of course."

Mark spread his hands. "There you have it. You gave him what he needed to make his start, some money, and a brand that would give him an excuse to have riders in his employ. He made use of it. But he wasn't primarily interested in the scant El Paso market for the cattle he stole, nor in the two-bit Mexican one. He was after something bigger. Something a lot bigger, Mrs. Farber."

"Don't talk in riddles! What do you think that something is?"

He rose. She didn't retreat an inch. They stood facing each other, her body almost touching his.

He wanted to hurt her now. He wanted to jolt her so that she would realize how deeply Vidal had involved her in his schemes.

"You're a fool," he told her roughly, "if you can't see what it is. Isn't it plain enough from the ranch-buying that you and Vidal have done? He wants the whole valley for himself. A cattle empire! He's gone way beyond you, Laura. When he gets what he's after he'll be safe, a strong and respectable landowner. And the rustling that started the ball rolling was done in *your* brand, not in his!"

"I won't believe you," she said in a shaky whisper. "I won't let myself believe you. You're a killer and you . . . Please get out and leave me alone!"

He had failed with her, failed to make her understand the facts. He should have expected that a woman in love would be like that—stubborn, fooled by the lies her man had told her. He had wasted his time in coming here.

It angered him. He thought he knew why she dressed in the provocative way she did, but it wasn't likely she knew about Carrie Whelan. Yet some woman's intuition must have told her she was losing Vidal. She was making a woman's fight to hold the man, and he was no good for her.

She was foolish, but the only thing left for Mark to do was leave her, get out. Still some magnetism between them was holding both. Neither spoke. Her lips parted a little with the rising urgency of her breathing. A part of his mind told him that she was another man's woman, that she had made her choice, foolish or not. But she was close—

The walls of his restraint broke down and he seized her, kissing her savagely.

His heart pounded as she clung to him with an ardor that matched his own, her arms tightening about him.

"No!" she gasped then, wrenching away. She brushed back her hair and looked up at him with wide, startled eyes. "I—I asked for that, I guess," she panted. "I wanted you to kiss me, and . . . Oh, what's the matter with me? I'm not cheap like everyone thinks. I've tried to build a new life here, the kind of life I've always wanted, and now I . . . Langford, please leave."

Her voice broke and she began to cry, silently and without bowing her head.

He stood still, not knowing how to cope with this. "Laura—"

"Get out!" she said fiercely. "You've upset my whole life and now you've made me feel like a hussy. Isn't that enough for you?"

He turned and tramped out of the house. But she followed him to the porch, asking, "What are you going to do, Mark?"

"I'm not going to tell you that."

"You don't trust me. Well, I guess you shouldn't. But I wish you luck. I mean that, Mark."

"Good night, Laura."

He walked slowly away from the Box F ranch house, his senses straining in the darkness to catch any sound or movement which would indicate that he was being followed by Luke or by some other guard. But there were only the night sounds of the range—an endless chirping of insects, the sleepy nicker of a horse in the corral.

REACHING the gully where he had left his mount he stepped into saddle and rode down the valley.

He had gone perhaps a mile when he saw the faint figure of a rider, skylighted against the stars on a ridge far behind him. Luke was following him. Well, Luke wouldn't want to go near the Whelan house, and that was where Mark was going. He would lay the facts before old Ben, and Whelan would help him. Together they could blow Vidal's game wide open.

Twice, as he neared the brightly lighted B W house, he had to dismount and lead his horse into brush, holding the animal's nose to keep him from nickering as circling groups of riders passed. Old Ben's crew was keeping watch on the range this night.

Mark left his horse in a brushy draw and went up to the house on foot. The night was warm, and in spite of the trouble in the valley, Ben Whelan still kept his doors open as he had in the old days.

He was in the room he used as an office, standing with his boots spread apart on the rich rug, and with his gray head jerking as he talked to someone. Mark stopped at the outside door, looking inside.

Ben Whelan had changed not at all, and probably never would. He was a blocky man with massive shoulders and a light skin that became beet red when he was angry.

He was angry now. He was talking to his daughter Carrie, a slim blonde in a riding skirt and a blouse. She had taken to wearing earrings that swayed when she moved her head, and she slapped a quirt nervously against a riding boot as they talked. She faced her father with a sulky petulance.

"I'll do as I please," she was saying. "I'm old enough—"

"You'll do what's decent, or by the Mighty I'll take a horsewhip to you! Sneaking down to Ramos to see some man! How long's this been going on?"

"Longer than you think," Carrie told him insolently. "And there's nothing you can do about it. I'm twenty. I was going to tell you about Trem and me, but—"

"The hell you was! Slipping into the hotel by the back way, so I have to find out about it from the snickers of gossip that's going around! While your mother lies upstairs in the bed she hasn't been able to leave for years. So Vidal's the man, just like they said, eh? Carrie, I've tried to raise you right—"

"With a horsewhip! You always did treat me like some animal that had to be herded."

"I'll see Vidal first thing in the morning." old Ben said darkly.

Carrie laughed. "And give the gossipers something more to chew on? Don't make an old fool of yourself. Trem will just laugh at you. He wants me to marry him all right, but I don't think I will. After all, I'm much younger than he is and I—"

"You ain't even in love with him?" Ben said hoarsely.

Carrie shrugged.

"You're a devil!" Ben said in a tone of awed fury. "A she-devil! How in hell can any daughter of mine be so—"

Mark lifted a hand and rapped abruptly on the door frame. He hadn't meant to listen to as much of this as he had, and he had wondered if he should leave and come back later. But the driving demand of his own problems had kept him here, and now it shoved him forward into the room.

The two inside whirled to face him. Old Ben's face sagged and he stepped swiftly back to his desk, pulling open a drawer.

Mark drew his own gun, leveled it. "Don't do that, Ben. Don't try to get a gun out of there. I just want to talk to you."

"Mark Langford," Whelan whispered. "I heard you was back." He had been drinking, Mark saw now, and that was understandable. "What do you want with me?"

"Just to talk, like I said. I want you to help me."

"Hell with you!" the rancher snapped. "I'll see that you hang this time! Carrie, go up to your room."

"No," Mark said, "let her stay. She ought to hear this, too."

HE LOOKED at her and again wondered why Vidal had bothered with her. She was attractive in a way, but her face was long and her slanted eyes gave her an insolent, brooding look.

"I've never seen a man get hanged," she said musingly, her glance traveling over Mark. "I think I'll be there to watch when they—"

"Carrie, shut up!" old Ben shouted. "Langford, there's nothing you can say to me. Tol Kinsinger was my friend and I was one of those that found you and him up at that cabin where you murdered him. There ain't any way you can talk around that."

It wouldn't be easy, Mark thought. The rustlers had done a good job on him that time. They'd had to, with him so close to them. They'd had to silence him, discredit him, and convince the angry ranchers that with his death the rustling would be explained and halted.

At the time, he had been easy for them to handle. He had thought he was dealing with mere rustlers and hadn't credited them with the intelligence necessary to set the trap they had for him. So he had walked right into it.

He thought back over it swiftly now. When he had returned to San Ramos from the Muerto he had been keyed-up, excited by his find. The ranchers and most of the townsmen had

been out in the hills in search of the missing cattle. When Tol Kinsinger had ridden wearily into town Mark had told him what he had learned.

They had talked in the street, and perhaps too loudly. They had decided to ride out and round up the ranchers, then move the posse in on Muerto Canyon in force.

They hadn't got far. The exertion of the ride had made old Tol's heart start bothering him. They had stopped at a deserted line cabin so that Tol could rest, thinking perhaps they could find some coffee which Tol believed would help him.

But it hadn't helped. By sundown Mark had decided to ride to San Ramos for the doctor. But as he had stepped out of the cabin something had struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head and he had gone down, his last awareness that of the smell of gunsmoke.

He smiled a little now, and he said, "You never did know how I came to be at that cabin, Ben."

Whelan snorted. "It was plain to see! Tol caught you there while you was waiting for your rustler friends, and you shot him. We found you lying just inside the cabin and Tol was just outside it. He'd got off one shot, and it looked like your head was busted open. But he'd been too slow. You'd put four bullets into his chest. We thought you was dead, too, until Doc Powys examined you."

The memory of it all flooded back on Mark. He had awakened in the back room of Powys' office, on the table that the doctor used for operations. Men had been standing close around him, talking, and he had laid motionless because the throbbing agony in his head would not permit movement.

They had found him on the morning of the day after he had been wounded and left for dead. They had gone out to the cabin because, after returning to San Ramos and learning that he had left again, they had thought he might have left word of his whereabouts in his office.

The word had been there, although he hadn't left it there. They had found a note which one of them read aloud in Powys' back room:

> Langford:
> The Mex paid off and you can get your cut tonight. At the cabin in Wildcat Gulch, like you said. Better get there early. We're heading out for Texas.

That explained everything, in their minds. Mark had worked with the thieves and the cattle had been sold in Mexico. His head had drummed wickedly when he had tried to think of a way to convince them that the note had been planted in his office, that he had been framed. But he'd had no proof at all, and had known they would not listen to him.

He had heard one of them ask Doc Powys if he would pull through to stretch a rope, and the doctor had said the chances were fifty-fifty. Satisfied for the time, they had all trooped out of the room.

LEFT alone, Mark had been groggy and sick when he'd roused up. He had lost a lot of blood. The whole side of his head was caked with it below his bandage. He had been able to think only of one thing—if he stayed where he was he would hang. He had dragged himself through a window and taken the first horse he found in the darkness.

By morning he had been beyond the Hueco Hills and far out in the desert, reeling limply in saddle, alternately raving and cursing. Only the stubborn will to live had kept him going.

Weeks later, when his mind had functioned clearly again, the memory of all that had been like a fevered nightmare. He had remembered a prospector helping him and he dimly recalled a week spent beside a stream in the White Mountains while his wound had slowly begun to heal.

He had kept going, after that. There still had been no way for him to convince the San Ramos people of the truth. He'd had to have time to think, time to gather at least some shreds of proof.

Now he drew a breath and began telling Ben Whelan how it had been. All of it, from the beginning.

WHEN Mark Langford finished his story he saw that Carrie was watching him with only a languid curiosity. But her father shook his head.

"I ain't believing that bunch of lies," he

said. "Not any of it. Why would two-bit cow thieves go to all that trouble to set a frame onto you? They'd sold the cattle below the Border and they had their money. Why—"

"Dammit, Ben, that's the point of the whole thing. The cows weren't sold. They were taken to Muerto Canyon and held there, like I just told you. Did you ever go up and look?"

"Why in hell would I do that?" Whelan shook his head again, doggedly stubborn. "Your argument just don't hang together. Why would rustlers hold stock up there? No money for them in that."

"Listen a minute, Ben. Those hombres were not just cow thieves needing money for whisky and women. They had a boss, a man who looked a long ways ahead. He sold some of the cattle not long ago in El Paso, when he got to needing money for his operations. Fattened them up somewhere on the way, likely. And he had a registered brand on them, like he had to have for a legal sale."

"What brand? You ain't told me what brand it was you saw."

"I'm coming to that. Our man isn't playing just for rustler's stakes, Ben. He's got a big scheme, and so far it's worked out for him fine. His first move was to get me out of his way. Since then he has rustled half the stock off this range. My guess is that he wants the land. This valley, all of it. By his rustling he's forced three ranchers to sell out to him so far. You're more stubborn than they were, so you've got our man stopped for the present. But he'll find a way to handle you."

"Are you talking about Vidal? He's the only one who's bought any ranches!"

"That's the man, Ben."

Whelan darted a glance to his daughter. "Vidal, hey?" he said musingly.

"Yes," Mark said, and pleaded, "Ben, listen to me! Throw your crew behind me and we'll smash Vidal before he smashes you."

Whelan squinted, giving Mark a sidelong, suspicious look. "You make it sound pretty good. Too good, I reckon. But I didn't get where I am by listening to every slick-sounding lie that was told me. You heard me and Carrie talking about Vidal awhile ago and so you fetched him into it as bait for me. You're still a thief and a killer, trying to—"

Mark swore again. "What would it get me to come here and lie to you? I can take you up to Muerto and show you those cattle!"

"For all I know you been holding them there yourself. Put my crew behind you so's you can pull 'em away from here, and leave my range open for your cow-thief friends? Not me. I can still see Tol Kinsinger lying there with four bullets in him, bullets from your gun, you sneaking coyote!"

"You hard-headed old fool!" Mark raged, thoroughly angered now. "I've told you how that was, told you that I was shot first and that someone else used my gun on Tol. Ben, listen to me!"

"I'm all finished with listening. Put your gun on the desk here and I'll take you down to the sheriff. There'll be time enough once you're in a cell, to find out if there's any truth in what you say."

"While Vidal gets out a lynch mob and strings me up? That weak-kneed sheriff you've picked wouldn't stand up to any mob, Ben, and you know it. It's no go, Ben."

Whelan swayed a little. His face was scarlet. He was used to being boss and didn't like to be crossed. "I'll get my crew in here," he threatened. "They'll handle you!"

Mark gestured with his gun. "Don't try that, Ben." He backed away, knowing that it was useless to argue any further with this half-drunk, stubborn old man. "I've got a job to do and if you won't help me I'll go it alone. But don't try to stop me, Ben. If you do, I'll kill you."

"By hell," Whelan began, "I'll see that you—"

He stopped. All three had heard the tinkle of a spur and the fall of a boot upon the porch outside.

MARK wheeled and darted through the door. Enough light came from the house for him to see and recognize the tall, spare figure of the man who was running away. It was the gunman, Luke Rucker. He had been listening! Perhaps had heard everything that had been said in Whelan's office. When it had become evident to him that Mark was leaving, he had turned to run.

Mark thumbed back the hammer of his gun, but eased it down again. A shot would bring

the whole B W crew, and he couldn't risk that. He raced ahead, thinking he had made a bad mistake tonight. He had misjudged old Ben completely, or maybe it was because he had forgotten the old rancher's stubbornness. He had gained nothing by confiding in the man.

All that was in the back of his mind, however. He saw Luke's running figure top a rise and disappear beyond it. When Mark reached the rise he paused, breathing hard and straining to see in the faint starlight, trying to locate the gunman.

Ahead was the draw where he had left his horse, lined with brush that loomed darkly now. He saw a furtive movement down there, and quartered down the slope toward it, entering a gap in the brush that reached to the edge of the dry watercourse. But he stopped abruptly, his nerves tingling with an awareness of danger.

A low, mocking laugh came to his ears from somewhere to his left, and he whipped around to face it. Luke had stepped into the open and on his face that gleamed in the starlight was a fixed smile.

"Now then, smart hombre," he said, and his gun flashed downward. . . .

In the parlor of the Box F ranch house, Laura Farber walked back and forth, lithely, restlessly. She stopped and looked at Vidal, who smiled as if to reassure her.

"I don't believe you," she said flatly. "Trem Vidal, you're lying to me!"

"Why would I do that?" He got up from his chair and sauntered over to her carelessly.

He was not a big man, not even an impressive one, at first glance. He was just ordinary-looking. Perhaps that was one reason why she trusted him, Laura thought.

He always dressed well, in the manner of a prosperous townsman. His hands were soft because he was used to easy living, his hair was well-trimmed, and his mustache crisp. It was only now that Laura had come to realize what a shrewd and calculating brain lay behind that high forehead of his.

"My dear," he said soothingly, "don't get so upset. There is nothing for you to be worried about. You and I are partners, remember. I've explained—"

"You haven't explained anything!" she cried furiously. "That's the trouble! It isn't from *you* that I know Box F cattle—or maybe I should say cattle under the Box F brand—have been sold in El Paso. And I didn't even know about it, didn't see any of the money. How do you explain that?"

"The money went into wages," he said easily. "It takes a big crew to handle an operation such as ours. I didn't want to bother you with the details. I had full authority to act for you, you must surely recall. But"—he smiled at her—"it seems that I made a mistake in not telling you all about it at the time. Honesly, my dear, I just didn't think it was necessary."

"We've got four ranches now," Laura said steadily, "with very little stock on three of them. Have you been afraid to bring the rustled cattle back into the valley because the other ranchers might recognize the altered brands? Do you plan to fatten them later?"

Vidal made a gesture of irritation. "You're condemning me on hearsay. Langford must have made quite an impression on you when he was out here."

"He was here again tonight. He had been out to Muerto Canyon and he had seen the cattle, heard your men talking."

Vidal's eyes took on a guarded look. "He's just a sorehead, a killer who got caught and is trying to stir up trouble. Well, he's of no particular danger to us. There isn't a rancher in the valley who wouldn't shoot him on sight."

Laura drew herself up, fear running through her. "Then you admit that what he said was true?"

"I admit nothing, my dear. You're putting your own meanings into my words."

"But you just said . . . Why would Langford be a danger to us, how could he be if what you've been doing is honest?"

HE SEEMED startled. His face showed that he realized he had been trapped. He took a cheroot from his pocket and lighted it with hands that were not quite steady.

"Laura, you're clever," he told her, smiling through the smoke.

"No," she said, "I've been stupid, a fool. You've used the money I advanced you, you've used this ranch and my brand—"

"All to a good purpose. We're going to be rich. Here in the valley we can raise the best beef in the Territory, a lot of it."

"And where will we sell it? I've talked to the other ranchers and they say that it's hard to find a market."

He nodded, chuckling a little. "Laura, I'm going to tell you something that no one else in this valley knows. I've made a lot of trips to El Paso and everybody in the valley thinks I made them purely to amuse myself to pass the time. But I didn't always stop in El Paso. I went far beyond—once to Washington, once to New York.

"I was making sure of something that's important to us. There is going to be a railroad built through the Territory, my dear. At first it will mean a good beef market at the construction camps, but when the trains begin to run it will mean more than that. The Eastern markets will be opened up to us. All the beef we can raise can be shipped out and sold. It will give this valley something it has never had before, a good steady market. And by that time we'll own all this range. But we haven't much time. We've got to move fast, before the other ranchers find out about all this."

Laura sank into a chair. She was trembling. "So that's it," she breathed. "That's why you've murdered and stolen."

He spread his hands. "I've never fired a gun at a man in my life, though I'm carrying one now. And I'm not a good rider. How could I steal cattle?"

"You hired the men who did. That makes you lower than they are!"

His mouth thinned. "Remember, I've told you we'll be rich. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"No! I came here because I was tired of having people lift their eyebrows when they saw me on the street. I wanted a life that was quiet and respectable, based on something solid. I wanted ... Oh, it doesn't matter now, I guess."

"I'm afraid it doesn't. I'll not be stopped now, Laura. I'm sorry, but you'll have to stay here at the ranch for a few days."

She lifted her head. "Why?"

Vidal smiled thinly. "After what I've just told you it would be unwise to let you leave. I'll speak to Luke about it. He'll watch you carefully, I'm sure."

Laura sat very still. "I'm to be a prisoner here, is that it?" When he nodded, still smiling at her, she mositened her lips. "If you must set a watchdog over me I'd rather you didn't choose Luke. I'm tired of having to fight him off."

Vidal laughed outright. "That's your lookout. You should be able to handle him, with the very proper attitude you've adopted since coming here. Even with me—nothing without marriage, wasn't that it?" Taking a derringer from his pocket he settled himself in a chair. "Luke's my best man, and I'm taking no chances with you now. I'll just wait here until he gets back...."

Mark Langford had seen the muzzle flash of Luke's gun and had heard the crashing report of the shot. But his reaction to the sound of Luke's voice had been swift, and he had thrown himself to one side in order to make as poor a target as possible. Even so, the bullet's impact had jolted him violently, spinning him around so that he lost his balance and fell.

That saved him. Standing up, his body could be seen in the starlight. Sprawled on the ground he was almost invisible. The shock of the bullet passed swiftly, crowded aside by the instinctive rallying of his faculties in response to the nearness of danger.

His gun still was in his hand. He fired quickly, then rolled to a new position.

LUKE'S shadowy figure seemed to loom higher as he triggered shot after shot at the spot where Mark's gun flame had blossomed. Mark knew that he himself had missed, which was to be expected when a man fired from an awkward position in the dark. Luke's bullets tore into the ground beside him, throwing dirt against his body. The brief orange-red flashes of Luke's weapon threw light into the gunman's own face. He was smiling wickedly, throwing the gun down with an easy precision.

Mark fired once more and again rolled to a new position. Luke was getting rattled now. He swore and fired again. Then the hammer of his gun clicked on an empty cartridge.

Mark had been waiting for that. He reeled to his feet, forcing himself to be careful, know-

ing he would have to make certain of this shot because with his ebbing strength he would be given no second chance. He strove to steady his body and to control the wabbling of his gun—and knew with a sick despair that he was too far gone. His wound this time was no mere scratch.

Luke was crouching, moving crabwise from side to side. He knew his danger and was thumbing fresh shells from the loops of his belt. Then he stiffened, seeming to have trouble with his gun. A jammed loading gate, Mark thought, as he tried once again to get a steady aim.

He couldn't, but he fired anyway. With a low cry Luke spun around, plunging into the brush.

Mark swayed. He had missed again, but it didn't seem to matter now. A sound of shouts and a rising beat of hooves came from the direction of the B W house. Luke had heard that, too. He was running, the sound of his boots fading away.

B W riders would be here in a matter of minutes. Mark moved up the draw at a hitching run and reached his horse. He dragged himself up into saddle and rode on up the draw, screened by the brush from the excited, yelling B W riders.

I've got to get clear of them, he thought. Got to get proof of what I say, for Whelan. The stubborn old fool will listen to nothing else. He keeps thinking about Tol Kinsinger. If I could prove—

But proof, Mark Langford knew, would be hard to get, when it came to showing that he had not killed Kinsinger. The trail was cold, two years cold.

CIRCLING around San Ramos, Mark rode into the livery two hours later. Sam Mulcahy came out with his lantern, swore when he saw Mark, and quickly extinguished the light. They spoke no word to each other and none was needed.

Mulcahy helped Mark to his cluttered living quarters and Mark sank down on a cot. The liverman rummaged in a corner and came up with a bottle of whisky which he placed in Mark's hand.

Sitting down like this, Mark felt somewhat better. The new wound was in the fleshy part of his right thigh, and it had done little bleeding. The bullet had struck his holster first and had been deflected by the leather. He looked up at Sam Mulcahy in the lamplight.

"I had some bad luck, Sam. Can you fetch the doctor?"

Doc Powys was a prim little man whose white-bearded face always had a scrubbed look. Mark grinned at him when he came into the room.

"Doc," he announced, "you sure raised some hell in this valley when you recommended Vidal to Laura Farber."

"What are you talking about?" the doctor snapped as he opened his instrument case. His manner made it clear that he didn't approve of Mark Langford but considered it his duty to help any wounded man.

"I'll explain it to you some other time, Doc," Mark said.

"I doubt you'll live long enough for that. I haven't got any cure for a stretched neck." Powys took out a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, put them on, and peered at Mark. "The Farber woman wanted someone to start up her ranch, and Vidal was looking for a ranch-manager job. He seemed to know the cattle business."

Powys unbuckled Mark's gun-belt, pulled down Mark's trousers, and with a scalpel he cut the underwear away from the wound. He explored around it with his fingers, watching alertly when Mark winced.

"The bone isn't broken, but the slug is lodged against it." Powys straightened. "You've been riding a horse, with that in you?"

"I couldn't have made it here if I'd walked."

Powys shook his head. "You fool a man, Langford," he admitted. "Two years ago I'd have sworn you couldn't move around at all, let alone get out of my office and steal a horse and ride across the desert. What's in you—iron instead of meat?"

"I guess I'm just stubborn," Mark said.

Powys took his instruments from his bag and arranged them in a precise row on a cloth. "Well, I've got to go in there after the bullet."

He watched slyly while he worked, not missing the clenching of Mark's hands and the twitches of agony that came to Mark's face.

When he was finished he straightened, wiping blood from his hands.

"You didn't make a sound," he said. "Pretty proud, are you?"

"Not particularly, Doc. I never did see where hollering did a man any good."

"Or was it just that you didn't want anybody in town to hear you, eh? They know you're in the valley. The Kinsinger boys have been riding ever since they heard about it. Every time they swing through town they talk about what they're going to do to you. And they will, too, sooner or later. A man's luck don't hold forever."

"Doc, you can take this or leave it—I didn't kill Tol Kinsinger. I was framed. that's why I'm back here."

"So?" Powys snapped his bag shut. "You've picked out a chore for yourself if you aim to convince the valley of that."

Mark slept fitfully that night. He was awake for hours at a stretch, staring up into the dark. He would have to leave here in the morning, in spite of Powys' orders that he remain in bed for at least a week. He couldn't be sure that the testy little doctor would keep silent as to his whereabouts, not with feeling running as high as it must now be in the valley.

A sick despair filled him. He had accomplished little so far except to stir up the old hatreds against him and to make Vidal realize that Mark Langford was dangerous to him. By now Luke must have told his boss all he had overheard at the B W, and Vidal would be acting accordingly. Ben Whelan had been warned about Vidal's game, and that made him dangerous to Vidal, too. Vidal's hand was forced, now.

Mark was aroused by Sam Mulcahy's grip on his shoulder, urgently shaking him.

"Mark, wake up!" the liveryman said. "Hell's on fire! While I was eating breakfast at the restaurant word came in that Ben Whelan was shot and killed at his house some time towards morning. Nobody seen the killer, but Carrie says she heard you threaten to do it. The ranchers have split up and some of 'em are making a sweep of the valley while the rest are going through this town house by house, looking in every room. They'll be here any minute now!"

MARK pulled himself out of the cot and dressed, his mind working with feverish haste. Ben Whelan was dead—there would be no help there now. Vidal had acted swiftly. And there was a certain pattern in the man's crafty thinking. The obstacle to his ambition had been removed, and Mark Langford would again be blamed for the deed. Much in the same way it had been worked two years ago.

But there was more to it this time. If Vidal married Carried he could get the B W, but where would that leave Laura? Vidal was ruthless. He might even have Laura killed, if she knew too much.

Mark's hands made fists, and he looked at Sam Mulcahy. Sam was his hole card this time. Sam could tell where Mark had been when Whelan had been killed, but Sam was an old man, and might be shouted down.

Whelan's killing was only one thing the ranchers would hold against Mark. They would remember Tol Kinsinger, and they might not be stopped by anything if they found their former sheriff now.

The logical, tempting thing for him to do was to leave the valley. To run—yes, to run again. But the image of Laura Farber was in his mind, and he knew he couldn't run.

Vidal, Vidal—the name drummed in his mind and his hate became a rising pressure that forced him to his feet.

"Sam, saddle a horse for me. The fastest one you've got."

"Yeah. You can get out the back gate, Mark." The liveryman paused at the door, rubbing his jaw, looking back. "They'll be looking for you to go out the lower end of the valley. If you was to go the other way, keeping to the hills, you might be able to make it across the Border. Plenty places to hide down there."

"I'm not looking for a place to hide, Sam." Mark forced his tightly bandaged leg to move lifting it and drawing on his trousers. "I'm going after Vidal. Where is he?"

"He wasn't at the restaurant this morning. Lives at the hotel, but . . . Hell, you can't look for him in this town! Not now!"

"I guess that's right. Well, get the horse for me, Sam."

Mark was swiftly revising his thoughts. Vi-

dal wouldn't talk, no matter what was done to him; he had too much at stake. But one of his hired men might be persuaded.

Luke Rucker was such a man. Luke had put the bullet in Mark, and would know that Mark would have no compunctions about killing him. If it came down to that, Luke would talk. He wasn't the bravest man in the world, anyhow.

Mark went out into the livery yard. Sam Mulcahy had a horse waiting for him and he hobbled to it and pulled himself into saddle, setting his teeth against the pain of his wound.

He rode out through the back gate.

He was several hundred yards from the livery when he heard shouts in the town behind him. But his horse was running at a long, easy gallop, and he bent low in the saddle and urged the mount to greater speed. . .

Luke Rucker rode up to the Box F ranch house on a lathered horse. There was a subtle swagger in the way he dismounted and came up the path. Laura watched him from the doorway, her arms folded and her eyes narrowing a little. At her angry insistence he had spent last night outside the house. Watching the place, she had thought, from some vantage point.

"I want breakfast," he said shortly.

"Go down to the bunkhouse then. The cook's down there."

"Not my cook." He grinned at her. "The boss said I was to take my meals up here from now on, so I can watch you."

Her head lifted angrily. But she thought it must have been something important that had taken him away from the ranch during the night, and was curious about it. Given the chance to talk he might tell her about it. She shrugged and went back into the kitchen.

He sat down at the table, watching her as she moved about. Laura was used to the stares of men and was woman enough to enjoy them a little, since they were proof of her attractiveness. But something about Luke made her edgy.

WHILE he ate she washed her own breakfast dishes. "If I'd known you were gone," she said, "I would have got out of here."

He chuckled. "I had a chore to do for the boss. But one of the boys was watching this place."

"You don't miss any bets, do you?" she said coldly.

"Not where you're concerned." His glance traveled over her. He drank eagerly from his coffee cup.

Laura turned away. When Luke had returned to the house last night he had drawn Vidal aside and they had talked in low, excited tones. Something important had come up, Laura had thought. Vidal had left almost at once, and now Luke had made a fast enough ride to lather his horse.

She had turned back to him, intending to question him openly when she suddenly realized that he had got up and moved close to her. As suddenly, he seized her, bending her back against the edge of the stove.

"You and me ain't been getting anywhere, Pretty," he said with a harsh insistence.

She twisted and tried to free herself. "Get away from me!" she panted. "If Trem finds out you've been bothering me he'll—"

Luke's thin mouth curled. "He won't do a thing about it. I'm valuable to that hombre, and besides I know a few things he wouldn't want told around. I can do as I damn please, savvy?"

"No, you'll not! I'll not stand for it!"

"Oh, come off that high perch! Maybe you don't know that Trem's took up with that Carrie Whelan, eh? She ain't got your looks, but she's got something Trem wants a heap more. He's dropped you, sister, and you might as well get smart and see it."

He was trying to hurt her, of course, trying to break her spirit. She fought free and darted to the back door, but his long arms seized her again and slammed her roughly against the wall. She twisted her head from side to side to avoid his harsh kisses.

She had had to fight men off before, in the mining camps of Colorado. With a certain type of man a woman needed only to be cold and unresponsive in order to win, but Luke was not that type. In desperation she kicked at him, then pulled the heavy .44 from his holster and struck him on the shoulder with it.

With a cry of pain he staggered back. Laura brought the weapon level, pulling the hammer back to full cock. Breathing hard, she

pushed her disheveled hair away from her eyes.

"Keep back!" she warned.

He straightened after a moment and moved toward her, saying thickly, "You damn tricky wench, I'll learn you to—"

But the gun stopped him. He stared at it, teetering on the balls on his feet, fully comprehending his danger now.

She edged along the wall and past the stove in an effort to put distance between him and herself. But again he moved slowly forward, a fixed smile on his face.

"You ain't going to shoot," he said. "You don't dare to, sister. A shot would bring them tough hands up here from the bunkhouse."

"They wouldn't get here in time to do you any good. And I can ride, Luke. I'd be on your horse before they got near the house." A new thought came and she added, "They wouldn't be in any hurry to help you, anyway. They all hate you—I've heard them talking. You get more pay than they do and you never do any work."

"I do plenty!"

"You sit around in the sun and oil your gun and act tough. And you call yourself a man!"

He was stung, as she had known he would be. Wicked lights came into his eyes.

"You seen that scar on Langford's head, didn't you? Well, I put that there, two years ago. If he hadn't been moving it would have finished him right there, though Trem and me both thought he was dead at the time. That's the kind of work I draw pay for. The dangerous jobs them other hombres can't handle."

LAURA thought that men like Luke were children, in a way. They liked to strut, to brag, maybe because they felt a need to build themselves up in the eyes of others. Perhaps she could nudge him a little farther.

She said, "Why, then you must have killed that other man, too. Kinsinger. Was that his name?"

"Yeah, sure. I tallied him, too. The old fool come stomping out of the cabin, right where we wanted him. I—" He stopped, realizing that he had been led into making a dangerous admission. "You black-haired devil!" he breathed.

She had maneuvered to get the table between them. With a swift movement he gripped it, upset it against her violently.

She scrambled back. The gun had not gone off, and she swung it toward him. But he leaped across the table and struck her arm so hard the gun flew across the room.

"Smart, ain't you?" he panted. "I'm going to tell you something else, since you're so damn curious. I put lead into Langford again last night. Would have finished him right there if it hadn't been for some luck I thought was bad. Trem twisted it around so's it turned out to be good. Old man Whelan's dead, and Langford's going to hang for it. Yeah, sister, I done that kill too!"

He was telling her too much, Laura thought with a stab of terror. His eyes were wild. He must be thinking he would have to kill her, too, in order to silence her. He struck her with his fist, his mouth twisting cruelly.

Laura had seen men fight to kill each other in the mining camps, had seen them use knives, their knees, boots, and clubs. When anyone's life was at stake all restraints were cast aside. That was in her mind as half-stunned by Luke's blow, she staggered against the stove. As he rushed toward her again she reached behind her and her fingers closed on the heavy iron grate-shaker. She struck him with it, swiftly, and with all her strength.

Luke's head was snapped to one side by the impact of the heavy thing. He took a step backward, knees crumpling, blood spurting from his temple where the shaker had struck, and fell heavily to the floor.

She drew a shuddering breath and circled past him without taking her eyes from him. Then she fled from the house and leaped onto his horse.

Luke Rucker was still for several minutes. Finally he lifted himself slowly, got up on his knees and put a hand to the side of his face. Feeling the warm wetness of blood, he looked at the hand, and cursed steadily as he got to his feet. He reeled out to the front porch and saw that Laura had taken his horse. Even now she was disappearing over the top of a rise.

He yelled to the men in the bunkhouse. Then he started running toward the corrals for another mount.

IT WAS mid-morning when Mark Langford halted his horse on the slope of a ridge, just far enough below its crest so he could look over the top of it without much chance of his being seen.

Groups of hard-riding men still moved about on the floor of the valley below. They were going from ranch to ranch, from one brushy draw to another. They seemed toy-like in the distance, yet Mark would have been less than human if their activity had not added to the cold pressure of fear within him.

They were looking for *him*.

Of necessity he had taken Sam Mulcahy's advice and kept to the hills. He had thought that if he could reach the Box F he might find Luke there.

But his wound was bothering him more and more. The exertion of riding the steep slopes, in the rising heat of the day, sent waves of pain through his body. His head throbbed and he knew from the chalky dryness of his mouth that he had fever.

Doc Powys had been right. A man's energy and will power would not carry him far when he had a wound like this one. Mark swayed, and gripped the saddle-horn to steady himself. He still was a long way from the Box F, but he had to have water and at least a brief rest.

He stared around at the hills. He was farther gone then he had known. His eyes wouldn't focus properly any more. But from his boyhood days he remembered there was a spring up here somewhere, a pool of clear water in which he had gone swimming sometimes, a pool that was shaded by big trees.

It was in a gulch, he recalled. He tried first one gulch, then another. It was by the cool of the shade and the smell of the water that he knew when he found the right one.

His eyes cleared somewhat and he saw the water, realizing that he still was sitting hunched in his saddle while his horse drank thirstily. Clenching his teeth against the pain he used both hands to lift his wounded leg over the horn. Then, losing his balance altogether, he fell to the ground.

He lay there for a moment, then gathered himself and crawled to the water. With one hand he splashed some of it over his face, then he drank.

The sound of cautiously running boots warned him. They were very near. He pushed his hands down into the shallow water and shoved himself up, trying to rise. His wounded leg collapsed under him. He tried to get his gun out, but failed in that, too.

They hit him hard, spilling him over into the water, jerking his gun away. There were two of them and their boots splashed in the water as they got hold of him again and dragged him to the bank.

"Pin him down!" one of them shouted. "Don't take any chances with him. I'll go fetch a rope to tie him with."

Mark thought distantly that they must have been following him for a long time. Indian-fashion, they had worked alone and not with any of the groups of valley men. They had sneaked into the gulch behind him. They had seen his condition and had known that he would be easy prey. And they hadn't wanted to shoot him. They wanted to save him for something else.

They were much alike in appearance, stocky men of around twenty-five or so. Their square-jawed faces were drawn with determination. And Mark Langford knew who they were—Alf and Joe Kinsinger, whose father had been killed two years ago, and whose death had been laid at Mark's door!

Mark had struggled to erase the blot of that frame-up from his life, and had failed. He thought bitterly now that things had swung right back to the beginning, like a heavy pendulum.

They pulled him to his feet and tied his hands behind his back. With the last ounce of his strength gone now, he couldn't fight them. Alf had brought two ropes, one of which he threw over the limb of a tree.

HE SAID unsteadily, "We'll boost him on his horse, Joe, and get this over with."

"No," Joe said. "We can't do that—can't make this no private hanging. We want everybody here so's they'll know justice was done. Fire some signal shots."

"And bring that fool sheriff up here? Hell, he'll take him down to jail and string this business out for months. There ain't a bit of use in us waiting, Joe."

"We'll do it like I said," Joe said sharply.

"Anyway, Carrie Whelan's got a right to see this, too, if she wants. If I know her at all she'll want to whip the horse out from under him. Sheriff Del Angus won't bother us none. That gutless potbelly'll stay right there in town, shaking and nursing a bottle till he's sure it's all over. We ain't acting for ourselves alone, remember. We got to play square with our neighbors."

Mark was hardly aware of the passage of time. The Kinsingers had tied him to the trunk of the tree and his weight hung inertly against the rope, his dulled, feverish mind thinking back over the mistakes of his life.

He hadn't tried to argue with them, knowing that it would be useless. Alf Kinsinger had gone out of the gulch to fire signal shots, and to guide the San Ramos riders in. Joe squatted on the grass with a rifle across his knees, not taking his eyes from Mark for a moment.

"You've got respectable, Joe," Mark muttered. "For a rustler that once stole from your neighbor, you're pretty worried about what they think of you now."

"Shut up," Joe said. "All me and Alf done was a little hell-raising. We was too young to know better."

Mark knew it hadn't been quite like that. And he knew about the mean streak in both Alf and Joe. Everyone in the valley knew it. But now that they had a brand of their own to run Joe was bending over backwards to gain the esteem of the other ranchers.

There was nothing more stiffly respectable, Mark thought, than a reformed thief.

He wondered what it would be like to hang, and his mind recoiled from that thought.

Then he thought about Laura Farber, remembering how she had looked when he had last seen her. A beautiful woman, vitally alive, and yet a strong-willed one. She would not remain unmarried for long, but when she took a man it would be the one of her own choosing. He would be lucky.

He shook his head dizzily. His mind had been wandering. The effects of his wound had him close to delirium. He wondered why Vidal had gone to such lengths to possess the valley, a place of rich range but one where ranchers could be only moderately prosperous on a slim market. It didn't seem to make sense, but there was no way for him to stop the thing now. He was entangled in the wheels of Vidal's scheme and now he was being crushed by them.

The gulch was filling with men. They rode in, looked, and waited, making raw jokes and telling of other hangings they had seen. They relaxed and smoked, taking their time.

Many of them were B W men. A few of these, the old-timers, Mark knew by sight. The others were new to him, hard-faced men whom he recognized as B W only by the brands on their horses.

Vidal and Luke rode in, followed by a third man whom Mark recognized as the Big Red he had seen in the Muerto. Maybe Vidal had pulled his crew down from there in anticipation of trouble in the valley. Well, he wouldn't need them now.

"Get on with it," Vidal said impatiently, looking around at the cowhands and ranchers. "I saw Carrie Whelan this morning, tried to comfort her. She wants this killer strung up."

That prodded them into action. Mark was cut loose from the tree trunk.

"You're wrong, boys," he said tightly. "Ask Sam Mulcahy where I was last night. I wasn't anywhere near the B W at the time Ben Whelan was killed. Damn you, if you'll take the trouble to—"

[*Turn page*]

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 58)

1. New Mexico.
2. Wyoming.
3. Tombstone, Arizona.
4. Rainbow trout.
5. Silver City, Idaho is the ghost town.
6. No, only that of a few varieties, chiefly the saguaro and various prickly pears.
7. Deadwood, South Dakota; Cripple Creek, Colorado; Dodge City, Kansas; Tonopah, Nevada; and Langtry, Texas.
8. That he was in a penitentiary. Braiding horse hair bridles, ropes, belts, etc., was a common occupation of inmates of many Western prisons in those days, and still is in several.
9. Nicker, neigh.
10. A piñon is the small, flavorsome, edible nut of a short-leaf pine of the southwest. The tree itself is also called piñon.

"Hell with that!" Alf Kinsinger cried. "We're thinking about what happened two years ago!"

"I was framed there, too," Mark said as a dozen hands lifted him into his saddle. "I was shot first. The last time I saw your father he was alive."

"You got Mulchay's word on that, too?" Alf jeered.

NO, MARK thought, he didn't have Sam's word on that. He didn't have anybody's word, and that was what had him licked.

He felt the rasp of the rope about his neck. His senses rallied and he glanced up at the sun.

"The hombre you ought to hang is right over there," he said. "Vidal. He framed me, and you fools have—"

"Sure," Joe Kinsinger said wickedly. "You was framed. That's what they always say, ain't it? You was sheriff long enough to know how it goes! Take some of the slack out of that rope, boys. We want him to choke slow."

"Stop it!" a new voice shouted, a girl's voice, and it came from somewhere above them, from the brink of the gulch.

Carrie Whelan was up there with a rifle in her hands, her boots spread apart in a stance like a man's. As Mark's glance whipped to her he saw that she wasn't alone. Laura Farber came into view beside her.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912. AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF Ranch Romances, published quarterly at Kokomo, Ind., for October 1, 1958. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and busines managers are: Publisher, Literary Enterprises, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, Jim Hendryx, Jr., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, None. Business Manager, Frank P. Lualdi, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is Literary Enterprises, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Frank P. Lualdi, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1958. Gabriel Glass, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1960.)

"Get close around him, B W!" Carrie shouted. "Keep all the others back from him!"

The men in the gulch were stunned. No man would have been able to stop them now, but they didn't quite know what to do about a woman who had a rifle in her hands.

And old Ben Whalen had ruled his outfit with an iron will. Carrie was their boss now, and the instinct of obedience carried over. The B W riders crowded in, jostling the other men—even Alf and Joe Kinsinger—aside.

Even at that, one of the older hands called gruffly, "But Miss Carrie, this hombre killed—"

"He hasn't killed anybody, you fools! Laura came to my house this morning and told me a lot of things. Luke Rucker's the man you want. He's been the killer here from the beginning—he bragged about it to Laura! Hear that, Alf—Joe?"

The men in the gulch shifted uneasily, staring at one another. Laura was scrambling down the slope. Reaching the bottom she forced her way forward, shoving at those who blocked her path.

Vidal chose to bluff it out. "Don't listen to that Whelan girl. She's upset, and the Farber woman lied to her. Carrie doesn't know what she's doing."

"I know, all right!" There was iron in Carrie Whelan, after all. She was like her father had been now, shouting down all opposition. "There's a railroad coming through the Territory and you found out about it, Trem. This valley's going to be rich, and you wanted all of it for yourself. You've rustled and killed to get it!"

Sweat glinted on Vidal's face. "In front of me, Luke," he said softly.

Luke Rucker moved with a quick precision, getting in front of his boss, drawing his gun and leveling it. Big Red moved in beside Luke, drawing his own weapon. The other men in the gulch seemed gripped by an uncertainty as the three backed away.

Mark muttered, "Don't let them—"

But suddenly the rope that had bound his hands came free. Laura was beside his horse, reaching up to help him. The hangrope slid slackly down as he lurched from the horse.

"Mark," Laura whispered as she slipped the

noose over his head. "Oh, my dear!"

He put her behind him. Snatching a gun from the nearest man's holster he moved forward with a hitching stride. The crowd split to let him through. These men were not sure enough of the truth of what Carrie had said to risk their lives under Luke's gun.

Luke saw Mark's move, and stopped. He seemed to become taller and that fixed smile of his came to his thin, dark face. The gun in his hand moved up, then down, with the easy precision of a striking snake.

His shot and Mark's seemed to blend into one roar of sound. But Mark's bullet had struck first, and Luke's went wild. Mark fired again and Luke's head was snapped far back. He flung out his arms, spun on buckling knees, and went down.

JOE KINSINGER had made a hasty draw —and fired at Big Red! Red staggered, a bullet from his own gun striking the ground. He tried to lift his gun again and couldn't. For a moment he swayed there, beard-stubbled face working, then he fell.

On Trem Vidal's face was a frantic look. He had a derringer in his hand but the range was long for that sort of weapon and he knew it. He turned to run. But the crashing sound of Carrie Whelan's rifle filled the gorge.

Vidal was spun around by the bullet. He clutched his side just under the armpit, then with a spasmodic movement threw the derringer from him and lifted his hands. Some of the B W men ran toward him when Carrie shouted an order to them.

There was confusion in the gorge now. Men talked excitedly, but to Mark Langford their voices were a distant sound. Joe Kinsinger came to him, saying in a trembling voice, "Mark, we. . .Hell, I don't know what to say!"

Mark gave him a brief grin. Laura had moved close to Mark again and now she was partly supporting him. Her fingers touched his cheek.

"Oh, my dear!" she whispered again. "When I saw you here with that rope—" She shuddered. "I thought I'd lost you. And I've been lonely for so long." She drew back, smiling to him. "I'm not being very proper about this, am I? You haven't said you want me."

"Laura!" He put his whole yearning for her into her name, and saw the gladness that came into her eyes.

That told him that they would build a new life together. A full life, here in the San Ramos where there was room for everyone to prosper.

MID-RIVER TITLE FIGHT

A HEAVYWEIGHT championship bout on a sand bar in the middle of the Rio Grande River? Men were talking about it on street corners and in saloons from Galveston to Tucson that February in 1896.

Robert R. Fitzsimmons, heavyweight champion of the world, had been challenged by a young fighter named Maher and had come all the way to Texas to accept the challenge. Ranchers and businessmen throughout the Southwest were interested in the fight being held nearby so they would get a chance to see it.

Arizona, New Mexico and even the Mexican state of Chihuahua had banned the bout. Just the previous year the Governor of Texas had stopped the scheduled Fitzsimmons-Corbett fight in Dallas by calling a special session of the state legislature for the express purpose of passing a law banning prize fighting in Texas.

The promoters and fans were determined, however, that the fight would be held. After a great deal of discussion, they transported the fighters to Langtry, Texas and the court of Judge Roy Bean, "The Law West of the Pecos." Judge Bean had the solution.

With the Texas Rangers, who had been sent to stop the fight, close on his heels, the Judge ordered the men to load some timbers and some rope onto a wagon, and he led the procession to the Rio Grand River, just south of Langtry. It was February 21st and the river was low, so Judge Bean pointed to a sand bar in the middle of the river, just inside Mexican territory, and instructed the men to erect the ring there.

This done, he instructed the fighters to "Git started!" and with the ranchers on the sand bar and the Texas Rangers looking on from the Texas side of the river, Fitzsimmons knocked Maher out in less than two minutes—but the men had seen their championship fight!

—Kay Tiller

The Man Who Caged the West

A True Story by I. G. EDMONDS

How John Gates helped to take the wild out of the wild West!

WHEN John Gates came to Texas in 1876 folks snickered at his dudish clothes. Later, many who laughed wished they had shot him instead. For this twenty-one-year-old youth was to cage the West, sound taps for its longhorns, end free grass and plant seed for a bloody range war.

Gates came to sell Texas its first barbed wire. A sheepherder would have been as welcome. Ranchers big and little united to denounce the new fangled invention. Some saw it as a threat to free grass. Others claimed it cut cattle and caused screw worms. The majority guffawed at the idea of puny strands holding an ornery long-horn. Feeling was so strong that Gates could not even demonstrate his product.

His money ran out. To eat he took to the poker tables in San Antonio's wide open saloons. Even at twenty-one he showed traces of the reckless gambling genius that later got him the name "Bet-A-Million" Gates. He swapped his derby for a Stetson and quickly showed San Antone that he was a man. They got to liking him, but not even friendship would beat the prejudice against "bob" wire.

In spite of his gambling successes, Gates was bitterly unhappy. Hundred dollar pots were chicken feed to a man whose ambitions included millions. In barbed wire he thought he saw a means of making his wild dreams come true.

WEEKS went by while he discarded a dozen plans before he hit on his big idea. Texas wouldn't look at barbed wire, but it would ride miles to see a rodeo. Then he'd give them a rodeo—and barbed wire would be the star performer. He put his poker winnings into the show and when that wasn't enough, he raised more by running a better bluff and having an ace in the hole. He frankly admitted that his rodeo was nothing but a western style medicine show with selling barbed wire as his goal. But he shrewdly stirred interest in the wire by the sure-fire trick of offering to bet the wire would hold the wildest steer off the range. By the time his money ran out he had covered five thousand dollars, all of it in small bets since he wanted to get as many as possible with a financial interest in watching the demonstration.

The show got off to a rip-roaring start with bull-dogging, cutting horses, bronc busting and horse races. Then Gates put wire on stage by herding forty steers into a barbed wire corral. One story claims that John tried to insure his bets by trying to get the gentlest animals for the demonstration, but found that there wasn't a long-

horn in Texas that fit the description of gentle. The steers poured into the wire enclosure, prodded by whooping cowpunchers. They surged forward, bawling. They hit the wire and piled up. Several fell and were trampled. Many were slashed by the cruel barbs. They hit the wire again and still again before they realized the futility. They started to mill then, beaten.

THE jubilant Gates offered to cover any bets that none of the cows would develop screw worms from wire cuts. After this dramatic demonstration ranchers started buying. Some wanted wire to enclose blooded cattle which soon would replace the longhorn. Others saw wire as a saving to them. A fenced range would need less riders.

Nesters started fencing off bites of the open range. Others, not so honest, bought wire to fence water rights to starve rivals. Tough believers in open range hit back, cutting fences and the barbed wire war was on. For months guns flared and blood soaked the range. But in the end barbed wire beat all its enemies just as it beat the longhorn.

As for John, he became famous as "Bet-A-Million" Gates, the man who would and did bet on anything from the speed of a raindrop running down a window to which lump of sugar a fly would light on.

He built great steel combines, ranches, oil companies and railroads and made all the millions he had dreamed of, but of all his accomplishments none had more far-reaching effect than his youthful salesmanship in barbed wire which directly resulted in caging the plains and was the first step in taking the wild out of the wild West.

ANSWER TO PUZZLE ON PAGE 43

A	R	C	■	A	C	H	E	■	M	A	S	K
R	A	H	■	P	O	O	R	■	O	N	C	E
E	Y	E	■	E	I	R	E	■	R	O	A	N
■	■	Y	A	R	N	S	■	T	O	N	T	O
A	M	E	N	■	S	E	V	E	N	■	■	■
M	A	N	T	A	■	S	I	X	■	H	E	M
O	R	N	E	R	Y	■	M	A	L	E	T	A
S	E	E	■	S	A	D	■	S	O	R	T	S
■	■	■	L	O	P	E	D	■	O	D	E	S
H	O	G	A	N	■	C	O	L	T	S	■	■
O	R	E	S	■	S	A	G	E	■	M	O	W
B	A	N	S	■	E	D	I	T	■	A	W	E
O	L	E	O	■	T	E	E	S	■	N	E	T

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(Continued from page 12)

hazards: a curve ball and a low batting average. But he hopes to be a big gun on television on ABC-TV's *The Rifleman,* where his trademark will be a Winchester rifle, instead of the usual pistol. Chuck's performance in *The Big Country* was so remarkable he's being recommended for an Academy Award . . .

The New Marlon Brando, businessman, reports to his office at Paramount for work on his long-delayed Western, *Guns Up,* which should start shooting any day now . . . Hopalong Cassidy's former home in Hollywood is now graced by its new owner, Kathleen Crowley, of television and the movies . . . George DeWitt, the comedian, recently bought a baby chimpanzee and named it for our friend Hugh O'Brien, of *Wyatt Earp* television fame . . .

Burl Ives is Big Daddy of the year: in *The Big Country, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* and in *Wind Across the Everglades.* Burl, our number-one ballad singer, likes working in movies; he says "I'm strictly a fat boy who likes to sit around. And in the movies you sure do." He's so good in so many of the new films that it's going to be a chore to include him out of an Oscar next time around. He could be nominated in two categories—best performance by an actor in a leading role, best performance by an actor in a supporting role—for different films. This would be the first time that's happened. Burl was born on a farm near Hunt Township, Ill., on June 14, 1909, and his full name is Burl Icle Ivanhoe Ives. He started singing folk songs at the age of four, strummed banjo and guitar by the time he was eight. He played guard on his high school and college (Eastern Ilinois State Teachers) football teams, and at that time harbored an ambition to be a football coach. But in the middle of his junior year at college the wanderlust hit, and he and his banjo took off and "bummed around the world together." Burl, who can't live if he can't sing, in 1956 recorded six albums, 30 sides and 120 songs for the library of Congress; these are released to schools and colleges as part of courses in history, music and literature. He and his lovely wife, Helen, have a son of eleven, Alexander; the three Iveses spent last summer cruising up and down the Hudson River on their barge, *The Water Gypsy.* Burl is six-feet one, ordinarily weighs about 286—but for Big Daddy Pollitt he had to gain 35 pounds. He has brown hair, blue eyes, and usually wears jodhpurs or boots: "A grown man can't stand in those itty-bitty hen-skin formal shoes." Burl is big in any way, even in appetite: "I'll eat anything that doesn't bite me first." He's a wonderful, mountainous minstrel who can't resist a Disney cartoon, can sing through the night with a group of convivial friends, consume a rib roast, dance a jig, wear horse-blanket sports coats and make any big screen seem ordinary size. He's an uninhibited dresser: African fezzes, imported Homburgs, Hawaiian shirts, English tweed caps. When it comes to eating, he prefers food, and he loves water to sail on.

If you haven't yet caught United Artists' *The Big Country,* do it soon. This is one of the best Westerns we've seen so far, starring Gregory Peck and Jean Simmons, Carroll Baker and Charlton Heston, with Burl Ives, Charles Bickford, Chuck Connors and Alfonso Bedoya. James McKay, (Gregory Peck), travels to San Rafael in the seventies to marry Pat Terrill (Carroll Baker), daughter of the owner of Ladder Ranch, Major Terrill (Charles Bickford). Terrill is feuding with Rufus Hannassey (Burl Ives) over a piece of watered land, but schoolteacher Julie Maragon (Jean Simmons), who owns the disputed land, refuses to sell. McKay, a peaceable Eastern gentleman, cannot understand the hostility of Ladder Foreman Steve Leech (Charlton Heston), but finally he realizes that Leech loves his boss's daughter, Pat, and imagines a rival in McKay. But the more McKay learns of Pat and her dad, the less rapport there seems to be between them; Pat is cut from the same tough cloth as her dad, and the only conversation she has with McKay is to chide him for his gentle ways. When Julie sells the disputed piece of land to McKay, the enmity which has been building between the Terrill's and their men, and Mc-

Kay, boils up into a bloody battle in which Leech is wounded, and Rufus and the Major are killed. Things straighten out eventually, and promising to share the contested water with the other ranchers, McKay and Julie ride off together toward a peaceful, promising future.

This film is no run-of-the-mill Western; some of the violent action is breath-taking, and the scenery is beautiful. As we said, don't put off seeing it.

United Artists has another big one doing well—*Man of The West,* starring Gary Cooper, Julie London and Lee J. Cobb. It's a humdinger, too.

John Payne, star of NBC-TV's *The Restless Gun,* did himself proud not long ago when he joined the panel of *What's My Line.* A real fast thinker, that Mr. Payne.

About Christmastime you'll be able to see *Tonka,* Walt Disney's live-action Technicolor adventure drama co-starring Sal Mineo and Phil Carey. This is the story of an Indian Brave and his horse, a wild stallion, who become involved in the hair-raising events leading up to Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn from which no white soldier escaped alive.

Paramount's *The Jayhawkers,* a guerrilla-type saga of the Kansas plains following the Civil War, gets under way right about now . . . James Garner and Jack Kelly, of television's *Maverick,* are doing a cross-country p.a. tour on behalf of the National United Fund Campaign. "Maverick Day in the U.S.A." is bound to be successful with two such straight-shooters behind it . . . Peter Brown, star of *Lawman,* and Vera Miles, Warner Bros. actress, are still acting like honeymooners—although they were married way back on Sept. 5th . . .

—Nancy Granger

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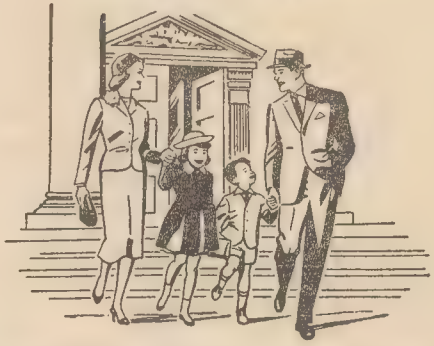

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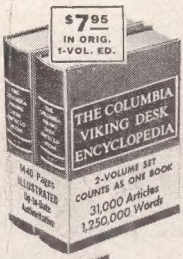

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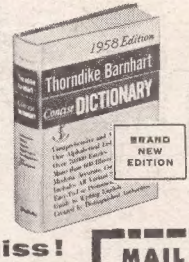

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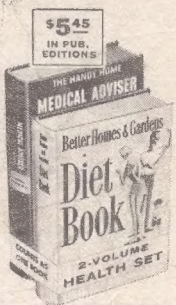

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